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VOL. II.

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CONTENTS :

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HENRY S. KING & Co., LONDON.

THE
HIGH MILLS

BY
KATHERINE SAUNDERS

AUTHOR OF "GIDEON'S ROCK," "JOAN MERRYWEATHER," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

HENRY S. KING & Co., LONDON.

1875.

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THE HIGH MILLS.



CHAPTER I.

HAUNTING VISIONS.

“ I climb the hill : from end to end
Of all the landscape underneath
I find no place that does not breathe
Some gracious memory of my friend.

“ No grey old grange, or lonely fold,
Or low morass and whispering reed,
Or simple stile from mead to mead,
Or sheep-walk up the windy wold.”

TENNYSON.

“ *AND I can't describe to you the agony it was to see them reach the mills, and to hear my father crying out at me.*”

It was Tuesday morning, and the blind beggar's visit had been on Saturday, and

had not been repeated; yet Michael found it impossible to think of him without those lines from George Ambray's letter describing his dream ringing in his ears.

He knew well that Bardsley was one of the people whom George had seen in his dream going to the mill with evil tidings of him. He had been unable for the last two days *and* nights to put from him a sense of George's being near; watching, as he had told Nora he had done in his dream, the threatened mischief to his name and the pure memories of him which lived about his home.

Michael could scarcely conceive an image more tragic than that of the returning prodigal held back by some implacable hand, while his sins alone should arise and go to his father.

Each day since he had first come to the mills his friendship for George had been strengthened. He had known him only in his shame and sorrow; but now the reality

of what he was before was felt by Michael almost as well as if he had been familiar with him from childhood.

Bright and healthful memories of George were incessantly gushing up from the past, and veiling Michael's stained image of him ; gracing and purifying it as the waters of a fountain grace and purify a discoloured and mutilated statue over which they play.

Lamberhurst was full of him. There was scarcely a spot known to Michael which Ambray had not pointed out to him as the scene of some wonderful performance of George's, or connected with him in one way or another.

That knoll between the pines was "where my son threw Marsham, the greatest wrestler in the country." And after hearing this, Michael never saw the knoll without seeing also a dim sculpturing of forms, among which one only stood out distinct—gladiator-like—beautiful, as the pale face he knew so well must have been in its bright health.

The Long Ridge fields were where "that young rascal won the foot-race," and where now Michael could never look and not see the flying figure, the feet scarcely touching the sunny grass, the flushed face certain of success.

It had truly become to him more like an actual than an imaginary object,—that figure which haunted Michael's paths, stealing upon him in all places, gliding over the grass in his white cricket shoes.

At one time it would be as the admired young athlete, his eyes downcast with the graceful modesty of unrivalled power, at another as the calmly triumphant lover of Nora—so handsome that the vaguest smile, the simplest remark from his lips must needs, it seemed to Michael, be more winning than a year's courtship from one less gifted than this young ideal of his: this wonder growing upon him from the past, for ever increasing and strengthening those claims he already had on him.

Michael had made his hero out of somewhat commonplace materials ; but owing to the life he had led, which, apart from his hard work, had been a very child's life, there was, perhaps, no kind of character so fitted at that time to fascinate his untaught imagination as George Ambray's.

Michael had read so little, had associated so little with minds in a better condition than his own, that he was unfit—not through any natural grossness, but through simple inexperience—to understand, without help, a character whose worth was veiled under misfortunes, either physical or mental. Delicate shades, subtile intricacies were lost upon him ; his mind required an idol made on the commonest principles of strength and beauty ; and in George he had found this.

To him the ruin of such a man was more tragic than the ruin of a thousand ordinary beings—a thing to be tenderly

hidden from the world, and most of all from the eyes of those who loved him.

With such feelings in his heart for the absent and helpless, Michael could but regard the blind beggar's appearance at Lamberhurst with much dismay and foreboding, even after he had felt reassured as to his own identity remaining unrecognized by Bardsley.

On Monday night he began to hope that the rain, which had fallen heavily all day, would continue, and perhaps weary out the old man's patience, sicken him of his errand, whatever it might be, and cause him to return to his old quarters.

On Tuesday morning, however, he woke to disappointment, for he no sooner opened his eyes than he saw the upper half of the poplar at the corner of the mill-field stirring in golden light, tremulously—exultantly, like the wand of some wizard alchemist in a crucible when a long-looked-for change has come. The first warm weather of the year had set in.

It was market-day : and Ambray, Michael, and Ma'r S'one were going to the town on Mrs. Moon's business. In addition to her farm, mills, and hop-gardens, the miller's sister-in-law carried on a small corn-trade, to which Ambray had for many years lent a managing hand. Since his illness, Mrs. Moon and the person whom she had put into the little corn shop at the Bay had so mis-managed things that on the day Ambray and his wife went to take tea at Buckholt Farm she begged quite humbly that he would resume his old duties. At first he declined doing so, but the remonstrances of his wife, Michael, and Ma'r S'one caused him to change his mind, and he promised to go to the Bay and look into things as soon as health would allow him.

This Tuesday was the first market-day that he had found himself able to undertake the journey.

The three set off in Ambray's waggon drawn by two stout farm horses, Michael driving, and Ma'r S'one sitting at the back.

Ambray was very silent and depressed because as they started he had seen the meeting of Nora and some of her friends who had ridden over from the Bay to visit her, and the miller had thought she had blushed and brightened overmuch when General Milwood's nephew stood talking and laughing with her as he held down the fine, angry little head of his black horse. Reports of how much more time than usual this young gentleman had spent at Stone Crouch during Nora's visit there had come to Ambray's ears, and he did not forget them as he watched Nora beating her pink palm with a rose, and talking so animatedly.

Ambray had felt very angry with her as he drove out of the farm-yard, and during all the journey was as gloomy and

jealous for George's sake as ever George could have been for his own.

"Look at her," he had muttered to Michael. "Silly flirt! How do I know but what my boy's prospects are going to the ground, being fooled, chattered, trifled away with every leaf of that rose? *Such* a jackanapes too! Ha, I'd like to lay my whip about his shoulders."

"It would be a bad move, master," answered Michael; "they have all their flour from us."

"I wish it may choke——"

"'Cline our 'erts!" murmured Ma'r S'one.

The thought that Bardsley's next, and perhaps last, visit to the mill would probably be while they were away was a source of so much satisfaction to Michael, that he enjoyed the journey as he had not enjoyed anything for many months.

CHAPTER II.

DARKNESS IN DARKNESS.

“O dark ! dark ! dark ! amid the blaze of noon,
Irrevocably dark, total eclipse,
Without all hopes of day !”

MILTON.

It was four in the afternoon by the market clock when, the business of the day having been concluded, Michael drove to the spot where he had arranged to meet and take up Ambray and Ma'r S'one.

He found them waiting there. Ambray had fetched his coat, and was crossing towards the waggon, and Ma'r S'one was doing something to the harness at Michael's direction, when all three were caused to turn their faces up the street by a sudden cry.

It was not a cry of acute pain, fear, anger, or entreaty; it was not a cry wrung out by any sharp and sudden aggravation; it was rather such a cry as might come from a creature who, in the loneliness and darkness of night, when no earthly ear can hear, and when God seems further than the stars, sets free some misery that has lain gagged all day, and lets it wail aloud.

It was a girl's voice, and its youth made its anguish the more penetrating and strange.

It did not soon cease, but went on minute after minute till every one in the street stood still and turned and listened while several hurried towards the spot from which the sound came.

Thus a little crowd soon shut from Ambray, Michael, and Ma'r S'one the object which they had seen when they first turned their faces and looked.

This was the figure of a girl standing at the edge of the kerb-stone with her hands stretched a little forward, the palms out-

wards, as if she were feeling for the wall on the wrong side of the pavement.

By the time Michael had consigned the reins to Ma'r S'one, and pushed his way with his master through the little crowd, the girl was sitting on the kerbstone where she stood a minute before, and the cry that still came from her lips seemed duller and more monotonous.

She appeared to be about sixteen years old, and at a first glance Michael thought her but a commonplace, slatternly, ragged creature, differing little from thousands of others he had seen selling fruit and flowers in the London streets.

She was very slight, her ragged clothes hung on her as on a reed; but her face, though it was small, was not thin or pinched with want. The cheeks and lips were at this moment colourless, but it seemed as if colour had only recently left them.

The head from which the bonnet and

hair-net had fallen was thrown back, the eyes were closed, the face was uplifted with an expression of intolerable misery.

The girl's clothes were dark and travel-stained, and her hair, of a pale and rare flaxen shade, looked strangely out of place upon her drawn up brows and over her shoulders, which were pushed up by her hands being rested at either side of her on the low kerb-stone where she sat.

These hands were red and black, as were also the little bare feet resting in the road.

The outline of the upturned chin was singularly perfect. It seemed, indeed, touched—as the sunshine fell on it—with a most tender spiritual beauty, which made one imagine that some unseen, angelic hand supported it; and kept this creature, so young and so helpless, from sinking utterly in those depths of anguish from which the voice—flowing drearily through the parted lips—appeared to come.

“What's this about? What's the matter

with the girl ? ” asked Ambray of a commercial traveller who stood near him.

“ Oh, she pretends she’s just been struck blind.”

“ Pretends ? ” echoes Michael, indignant, though whether with the speaker or the girl he hardly knew.

“ Struck blind,” Ambray repeated; “ what, just now ? ”

“ Hush,” said the commercial traveller. “ Let us watch, I fancy there’ll be some fun presently : that policeman has his eye on her. I fancy, from what he said, he knows her, and has seen this game before.”

“ Ah, the young baggage ; is that it ? ” murmured Ambray, beginning to feel resentment at having been duped into a feeling of pity but for one instant ; and, with a stern satire in his eye, he set himself to watch with the rest of the crowd—to watch and judge this most wicked impostor or most bitter sufferer, whichever she might prove to be.

She had arraigned herself, or fate had arraigned her, before a set of judges which, perhaps, represented the world about as faithfully as an ordinary court of justice does.

The larger part of the crowd had collected since Ambray and Michael had arrived at the spot ; but those standing closely round the girl were simply the passengers through the street who had been all simultaneously stopped in their different pursuits and thoughts, and compelled, by this sad voice, to turn and fix their minds, one and all, on the same subject.

The number of these was about fifteen, and consisted of the commercial traveller, standing by Ambray ; three friends, two of whom were poor-law guardians, and one an impressionable old gentleman, who boasted of never being deceived in his first impressions ; the watchful policeman ; a little tailor, going home disappointed of

some money he had expected; a party of young ladies and gentlemen just returned from a yachting excursion; an old farmer and his wife; a clergyman; a tramp of doubtful character; and a little child about three years of age, standing with its finger in its mouth, and exactly the same expression of rueful pity in its face as Ma'r S'one had on his as he turned round while standing holding back the powerful cart-horses, meek as lambs against his feeble arm.

The commercial traveller did not put any question to the girl, as most of the others did in turn, but stood prepared, as he had said, to enjoy the fun of seeing an imposture detected, an impostor hunted down. He was a hard-working, honest man, who lost something considerable yearly in actual pounds, shillings, and pence, through not departing a little from his own ideas of honesty. This loss was never absent from his mind, and the only compensation he found—for the world offered him no other—

was dwelling on the sufferings of those who had not, like himself, chosen the straight path. His virtue was as a wolf within him, demanding for its food the tears of detected vice. He was one of those men whom if placed among the sheep on Christ's right hand would find less reward in hearing the words "Come, ye blessed," than in listening to the "Depart, ye cursed" uttered to the goats on the left hand.

Next to this man stood Ambray, who hated law for the simple reason that it had always gone hand in hand with Mrs. Moon against him. This caused him, though his own judgment was hard against the girl, to regard the delighted excitement of his commercial neighbour with much disgust; and he could not help comparing him in his mind to a great blue-bottle fly buzzing with delight as he watched some feeble and pretty creature of his own species entangling itself in a spider's web.

The three friends stood nearest the

vagrant—and of these it was the impressionable-looking gentleman who spoke to her most often, and who always appeared more and more convinced of her sincerity and innocence each time he spoke to her, whether she answered him or only continued her bitter crying.

His friends the poor-law guardians did not seem greatly impressed by his opinion. One—the perfection of whose health and toilet showed who and what had been his chief care through life—had clearly written on his handsome face an intimation to providence that, after such a winter as the parish had undergone, he should certainly expect this to prove a case for the prison authorities, and not for the poor-law board.

The person who leant upon his arm, was also a rich man, but one who had grown cadaverous and hollow-eyed, and had sickened of his sumptuous fare, his purple and fine linen, in considering the sores and cries

of those who came to ask for the crumbs that fell from his table. He was a charitable man whose charity had been much imposed upon; and as he stood looking at the girl none in the crowd doubted her more, and none were so anxious to believe in her and to give her assistance and comfort.

The policeman stood just behind the commercial traveller, whom he had taken into his confidence. With his hand on his hip, he listened with a smile of supreme contempt to all the questions, sharp or gentle, that were put to the miserable girl, and to the answers that she gave.

The disappointed little tailor, with the black cloth—in which he had just taken home the work for which he had not been paid—twisted round his arm, stood a little aloof from the others, lost in thought. He was too humble-minded a man not to have accepted instantly the verdict of his betters; and one glance at the poor-law guardians, the policeman,

and commercial traveller, had convinced him as to the depravity of the creature whose cries had stopped his feet on their sad journey homewards. But though he accepted the verdict undoubtingly, there was a furtive, frightened, but an almost fierce anxiety in his eye as to the judgment that was going to be passed on the offender. He had never seen her before, yet he was possessed by a feeling of which he was greatly ashamed, but which none the less held him to the spot—a feeling that there was no one in the world so well able as himself to offer evidence as to how easy might have been the slipping of these young feet, how terribly hard it is to resist the slime on want's steps when the head is giddy with hunger and the heart sick.

The yachting party had evidently enjoyed a gay little cruise, and were rather glad to hear and believe that the girl was an impostor, and that consequently there was

no need for them to put aside their gaiety and look on the matter in a serious light.

The old farmer and his wife took the whole affair as one of the amusements of the town—a visit to which was an utter failure, unless it afforded some such sight. They only removed their spectacles from time to time to wipe them and put them on again, and begin the study of the town impostor with renewed zest.

The tramp of doubtful character apparently had many if not good reasons for keeping behind the policeman as much as possible. He looked very haggard and weary, and carried his boots over his shoulder on a stick that had as vagabond-like an expression as his face. His eyes remained fixed on the young girl, wistfully alert to meet *her* eye, and signal to her with as much force as could be thrown into a wink that, stranger as he was, he considered her game was up, and that the sooner she made off the better it would be for her.

The clergyman appeared also to have come to the conclusion that the girl was acting, but he seemed to be watching the little crowd about her with almost more interest than he looked at her. Perhaps this was because he knew most of these persons pretty well, and was wondering with melancholy interest which among them was fitted to cast the first stone. He had not the pleasure of the commercial traveller's acquaintance, or doubtless he would have wondered no longer; for, though that gentleman was really too good-hearted to do personal violence to any one if he could help it, yet, as far as *right* went, he would assuredly maintain that he could take up the largest stone at hand, and smite with clear conscience and unerring aim straight through the hypocrite's young bosom to her heart.

The little child and Ma'r S'one were the only ones who regarded her simply as being in trouble—who, without inquiring

as to the why or the wherefore, turned to each other with faces that said only, with rueful sympathy—"Here are tears!"

"Come, my poor girl," said the impressionable gentleman, trying to control his excitement, and to speak calmly, as he bent down to her, "try and tell us more plainly how this came. Were you crossing the road—or were you here?"

The cry, without stopping, uttered the word—

"Here."

"You were standing or walking here a few minutes since, and you could see plainly?"

The crowd closed a little to hear the words with which the cry, still unaltered in tone, was now burdened, and caught such sentences as—

"Oh, this darkness! Oh, grandfather! Where is my grandfather?"

"I shouldn't wonder if that ain't the old man's cue for coming on," whispered

the policeman to the commercial traveller.

“You’ll see, sir, it’ll be as good as a play afore long. The old raskil ’ull come fumbling along with his dog, and pretend to hear her all of a sudden, and call her, and find out she’s just gone blind, and there’ll be a fine scene between ’em. They’ve carried on the exact same game at Manchester, Birmingham, and half a score of other places; but we’ve got ’em now—*we’ve got ’em!*”

“You’ll be fools if you haven’t,” observed the commercial traveller. “But the girl *is* blind, isn’t she?”

“Yes, sir, bless you, blind as a bat, and always has bin.”

“Can you tell us what there is opposite? What you saw just here before you lost your sight?” asked sharply the poor-law guardian, with the florid face.

“The gentleman might be sure she’d been well put up to all that,” sneered the policeman.

“Rather!” agreed the commercial traveller.

It so happened, however, that both found themselves mistaken in this matter, for the girl began to murmur about things that were not in the street, and that, in fact, seemed to belong to another place altogether.

The policeman rubbed his whisker with a puzzled, uncomfortable air, these mutterings of churches and factories were not in his programme. He could not understand them.

The bitter voice, dull, monotonous, wailing, still flowed from the parted lips, and for a minute all again listened to it without interruption, while the sea, moaning at the end of the little street, seemed offering solemn attestation as to the truth and depth of its misery.

All this time Michael Swift had been looking on and listening with feelings more strong than any one's in the crowd.

Like the little tailor, his experiences had

made him merciful and slow to condemn. Like the impressionable gentleman, he was susceptible to the charm of soft flaxen hair and a lovely profile, and like Ma'r S'one and the little child, he could not unmoved see tears pour down as rain.

These weaknesses in his nature acting upon one another caused him to be seized more than once with a very strong wish that the commercial traveller or the policeman might do something that would give him a fair excuse for knocking one or both of them down.

"Now," he heard the policeman whisper as he stood watching them, "here comes the old scamp, sir. Now see if it don't all go just as I said."

Michael, turning to look in the same direction they were looking, saw coming quickly down the street a blind man and a dog, whom, with a sense of vague alarm, he instantly recognized as Bardsley and Jowler.

He glanced hastily from the old man to the girl, and fancied by her face she heard him coming. Her lips and closed eyelids trembled, and she grew much paler.

At first things went exactly as the policeman had prophesied.

The old man came along with a swinging, agitated step, stopping now and then to listen and tremble, and turn himself about with an air of great confusion and distress of mind.

At last he cried out passionately—

“It *is* her voice! Polly, my child, where are you?”

Then suddenly wringing his hands and appealing to the crowd, he cried—

“What is this? Why are you all gaping here? What has happened to my child? Why is she crying? Let me come to her. Oh, let me come to her!”

The policeman and commercial traveller exchanged smiles as they parted to let him pass between them.

The impressionable gentleman hurried forward to meet the old man, and staying him by laying his hand on his tattered sleeve, explained to him hastily but gently what had befallen the girl.

To the infinite amusement of the policeman and commercial traveller, the profound admiration of the tramp, and the disgust of the little tailor, the blind man appeared to be terribly stricken by the story.

He interrupted it constantly with bitter exclamations, by which he managed to make known that this calamity had been the great dread of his life since he had had his grandchild left solely in his charge and dependent on him; that she had been blind once for several years when a little child, but had been cured, though the doctors had warned him she might at any time lose her sight again suddenly. And now the dreaded blow had fallen! Now, when he had not a farthing in the world to help her with.

“Let me pass, sir; let me go to my child!” he cried, waving his arms wildly.

“When are you going to put an end to this?” asked the commercial traveller.

“To me it’s a sort of blasphemy.”

“Wait a bit, sir,” whispered the policeman, with superior calmness. “Now, hasn’t it been almost word for word as I told you? Now, you’ll see, sir, when he says, ‘Polly, Polly, what is this?’ the girl ’ull throw herself into his arms and shriek out, ‘Daddy, I’m gone blind?’ and make everybody cry.”

“I have my pocket handkerchief ready.”

“Well, I can tell you, you may want it, for she does it uncommon well, sir.”

“I am ready.”

So likewise is old Bardsley ready. He has made his way to his grandchild, has cried in his best style, “Polly, Polly, my child, what is this I hear?” and stands with his arms outstretched before her.

But here comes something that is not in the policeman’s programme.

Polly does not apparently recollect her cue.

Instead of throwing herself in her grandfather's arms and crying, "Daddy, daddy, I'm gone blind!" she does no more than raise herself a little from the pavement by leaning on her hands; then seems to stiffen in all her limbs, while her white face stretches towards the old man, and her lips turn blue in trying vainly to speak.

Another instant and she has fallen to one side and rolled over in the road at Bardsley's feet.

With far less effective dramatic action than he has previously shown himself master of, the old man goes on his knees and raises her. The "Polly, Polly, what is this?" that he mutters in her ear now is not nearly so touching. The voice is sharp, husky, scarcely audible.

The crowd presses nearer. Bardsley turns his sightless face about wildly, for Polly is uttering strange shrieks, strange

words. He tries to shut the voice up in the blue lips by holding them against his face, but it rings out wildly—shrilly.

“No more ! No more ! Oh, daddy, I can’t do it never, never, never more !”

“Hush, hush, Polly ! Polly, hush !” mutters Bardsley. “She raves, gentlemen, she raves. This sudden affliction has turned her brain. There ; quiet, Polly, quiet.”

But Polly’s fingers begin to clutch about him like a drowning creature’s, and her lids open and show her sightless blue eyes rolling.

“Daddy, daddy,” she cries in great labouring breaths, “I seed fire, I did—inside my eyes. Oh, I’ll never, never ! Oh, let me beg—beg all day—but never that—never !”

“Hush, Polly, hush ! You wouldn’t ruin—you wouldn’t. Ah, gentlemen, her brain is gone !”

“Where’s all them people ? Where am

I? Am I mad? I thought I was a-going mad, daddy, I thought——”

“Hush, child! Dear, good Polly—so good—so good to me. She wouldn’t ruin me—she’ll be quiet. Gentlemen, we will go home. I will take her home. She will be better at home.”

Suddenly he seems to grow suspicious, and waving his disengaged arm with a passionate vehemence, cries hoarsely—

“Stand back, I say, and let me take her home! I want nothing of you—not I! I want to take my child home. What are you crowding for? Let me pass.”

The policeman looks back at another one who is waiting a little lower down the street, and who joins him when he has made his way to the blind man and girl.

The crowd closes round the group.

No outcry is heard, only an indistinct flood of protestation from the old man, and soon the little crowd parts, the four go very quietly down the street in the direc-

tion of the prison, the girl clinging to her grandfather, and looking white and terrified, but quiet and stricken with remorse, as if her mind had, under this new shock, recovered itself and become conscious of all that had happened.

The little tide of street life that had been stopped by Polly's voice flowed on its way again.

The impressionable gentleman, who had several times declared that he would stake his life on the truth of a girl with that face, went home too much depressed to speak to any one, feeling himself to have been thoroughly taken in.

The handsome poor-law guardian took his rich, cadaverous-looking friend home to dine with him, and rallied him with much lively grace of manner on his low spirits and poor appetite.

The commercial traveller went away with a smile on his face, and Pope's line about an honest man on his lips.

The yachting party went home satisfied that there had been nothing worth making themselves miserable about.

The old farmer said to his wife—

“Now that’s over, old woman, let’s come and have a look through the telescope.”

The clergyman went to wait for the policeman, that he might ask some questions about the prisoners.

The little tailor rolled his cloth round his arm very tightly and went quietly home, where he surprised his wife by sitting up the whole night, keeping her awake with his “stitch, stitch, stitch,” and by being for many days so gentle, sober, and industrious, that, as she told her neighbours, she suspected him of having had a fright or a dream.

The tramp, when he saw Polly and her grandfather led down the street, had turned and looked after them till they were out of sight, then dabbed his palm

flat against his eye, and went on his way muttering an oath.

Ambray and Ma'r S'one had got into the waggon, and Michael was arranging the cover and the back, when he heard a cry from the direction in which the blind pair had been taken. It was Bardsley's voice, and in the fierce torrent of rage it was uttering, Michael caught more than once the name of Ambray.

Feeling as if his feet were turning to lead, he got into the waggon and rattled away over the jolting High Street stones.

CHAPTER III.

THE SWEET PEAS.

“ She lifted their heads with her tender hands,
And sustained them with rods and ozier bands ;
If the flowers had been her own infants, she
Could never have nursed them more tenderly.”

SHELLEY.

ALL the way home Michael had a dull, heavy sense of danger over his spirits, and a vague sort of surprise at being able still to drive on unmolested.

The rattling of the chains and jolting of the waggon over the stones every moment seemed to him the whole town coming in pursuit.

The pine knoll was full of golden light, and the lambs were couched on daisies in the Long Ridge fields:—all things as

they came near the High Mills seemed full of peace and quiet beauty.

Michael's great dread was pacified.

He put up the horses at Buckholt, and finished his work at the mill with that sense of ineffable relief and thankfulness that comes to one who has wakened after a terrible dream in glad surprise to find things as they were before.

When, after his work was done, he went up towards the miller's cottage, he saw Nora sitting on a stool in the garden pathway, tying the sweet peas to the sticks.

Mrs. Ambray sat at work inside the window, and the miller was in the porch, sometimes watching Nora, and sometimes letting his eyes rest on the purpling hills that rose between him and his distant idol.

A well-worn volume of "Paradise Lost" lay open on his knees. It was the only book besides his Bible that he did not consider trashy and useless after school books

were done with. His love for it gave Mrs. Ambray and Michael increased respect for him, as his choosing such a companion for his long hours of loneliness made them think he must be quite at home with all the archangels, and on intimate terms with his first parents.

Ambray liked to encourage this idea, as since George was absent he liked to seem at a distance from all.

But it was in truth a very awful and mysterious book to him, and, in these days of trouble, seemed to bear a vague but solemn reference to his boy's fate, and so keep a grand though threadless sort of interest for him. He felt sure that powers as mighty as were there described were struggling now for the salvation and ruin of his son.

"Surely—surely," he sometimes muttered, "there shall again be war in Heaven before God and angels shall agree to let *him* be lost."

As Michael came up the garden on his way to some work at the back, Nora called to him to give her her ball of worsted that had rolled down the path.

He held it in his hand as she fixed the stick. She paused before taking it to coil a tendril round the stick.

While she was doing so, Ambray, who had for some time been studying her with his stern grey eye, asked suddenly,

“Nora, how long did Captain Grahame stay at Buckholt this morning?”

“Oh, till about twelve, I think,” answered Nora carelessly.

“Then I think it would have become you better to have sent him away before—ay, by a good hour too,” burst out the miller with such energy that it brought his cough on.

“Thank you, Michael,” said Nora, “you may hold this if you please while I tie it.” Then in a louder tone she said to the miller, “I couldn’t very well have told him to go.”

“ Well, I hope George will hear nothing about him, that’s all,” growled Ambray as he recovered his voice.

Nora quietly finished her little task, set Michael at liberty, then rose and went towards the house.

Michael could not hear what she said to the miller; but he saw the grateful glow that rushed to the old eyes and cheeks at her words, and so guessed their meaning.

This little scene came strangely to Michael. It was like an answer to something he had had in his mind all day, from the moment when Ambray had drawn his attention to her playing with the rose from Stone Crouch conservatory.

As he worked in the little garden, while Nora was supping with the old people, in the cottage, he recalled her look again and again.

When he had stood looking down at the flowers her fingers supported, he thought

in glancing from them to her face as Ambray spoke, that these themselves were scarcely more innocent than that seemed to him then.

He had noticed when the name had been spoken and when she answered—no change had come in the fresh tint of her cheek. It had rested firm and unaltered as the colour on the flowers.

It had only been when the doubt in the miller's mind was so plainly felt, that the rich blush had overspread it and put the pink and white peas to shame, and that the eyes had made the purple peas look dull, so indignantly had they flashed.

For all this innocence and faithfulness of Nora towards George, Michael suffered some honest sorrow. He had been telling himself all day that the burthen he bore would be but half the weight it was if he could discover that Nora's heart was changing, that her love was passing from George

to some one else—to this young gentleman of whom Ambray was so jealous.

The thought was not banished by the piteous spectacle of the blind impostors, but was fixed in him more firmly. Therefore the little scene in the garden had been full of intense interest for him.

The reason of this increased anxiety was, that Michael believed he had discovered the cause of George's neglect of Nora.

When he had heard George's letter read, he had guessed directly that Bardsley was one of the models he mentioned, and Michael had ever since wondered about the other. Directly his eyes had rested on the blind girl's face, he had felt sure that he saw the "gem" of which George had written, and in all probability the cause of George's change towards Nora.

What sad story lay between the early time when that dateless letter was written and that moment, the only one when he saw Bardsley and George together, Michael

could not know. He could but make vague guesses at it, by the help of Polly's lovely face, as he had seen it to-day for the first time, and Bardsley's fury during *that* terrible moment.

He knew that since Bardsley had not recognized him, it was solely this unknown wrong which George had done him that he was seeking to make known to old Ambray.

As he trained the wall cherry at the corner of the cottage, he heard them talking within of George as merrily as if no cloud, no mystery, no cruel silence lay between them and him.

Hot drops stood on Michael's brow to think how soon all might be changed. If Bardsley sent for the old miller and revealed to him some crime of this beloved and longed-for son and lover, what anguish must Michael endure when he should hear him spoken of with anger, and yet be himself unable to speak those words which would disarm all wrath.

“No,” he said to himself, “that must not be. If all the power of ceaseless watching—unshaken patience—if all the inexhaustible strength of such a friendship, such a fear, and such a hope as filled his soul could guard the dear name from stain or spot, he would so guard it.”

He had watered the sweet peas, and was standing by them watching the drops on the flowers, and inhaling their pleasant scent, when he heard Nora close the cottage door and come down the path.

He was sorry he had not moved away before she came, for he had allowed a strange weakness to come over him as he stood there.

Their delicate beauty and odour seemed expressing to him, better than his own thoughts could express, the infinite tenderness which every good heart has hidden from all but itself. He had thought of Nora’s love for George at first, and then of

his own feeling for both, and somehow, the scent of these homely flowers became to him as the very utterance or expression of his great yearning over these two.

So when Nora came she found him bending over them, with two of the pink-and-white wing-shaped things supported by the back of his hand.

She thought he had found some harmful insect on them, and asked carelessly as she approached the spot,

“What is the matter, Michael?”

Michael thought that she had seen something strange in his face, though the daylight had all but gone, and was for a moment unable to answer.

Then Nora, thinking, as he took his hand from the peas, that he had not heard her, paused to glance at her work and gather a few of the flowers to take home with her.

In her presence, touched by her fingers, and overhung by a face so sweet in its evening weariness, the flowers became to

Michael as things of another world. He gazed on them with a great tenderness.

"How bonny they are," he said; then he trembled and grew chill at the sound of his own voice, for though he had spoken low, the sound seemed to ring and linger and vibrate all through the moon-silvered downs.

"You are fond of flowers, then?" said Nora carelessly, thinking a commonplace quite good enough for poor Michael.

"Yes—only sometimes there seems such a sort of waste about them," answered Michael, his great hand hovering gently about the tender heads.

"Does there?" asked Nora, with simplicity and interest. "*I never noticed that.*"

"It always seems such a pity," said Michael, "that they go on being what they are—like these—smelling so sweet—looking so, and not a soul noticing them except just now and then as we—as you are now. It reminds me when I see them so, and think of 'em sending out their

scent such hours and hours in the day and night without a bit of notice taken of 'em—it reminds me—they seem to me, like—like a sort o' love on one side—that sort that's nowhere to go to, and yet goes on."

Nora was surprised. She did not doubt that Michael was alluding to his own secret sorrow, but was surprised to hear him mention it at all, and especially in this manner. She thought it best to answer vaguely.

"Perhaps there is less waste in the world than you think for, Michael."

Michael gave a great, honest, ponderous sigh as he thought upon the waste *he* knew of—the love of that good heart so near him.

At that moment, just as Nora was placing her flowers in her belt, and thinking she would like to say something to the poor fellow, the miller's wife opened the door and called out—

"Michael, is that you? Your master wishes you to hurry on after Miss Ambray,

and keep her in sight till she gets home. He's afraid o' those Irish haymakers that went up by Tidhurst this morning."

Nora laughed, and now Michael felt sure there *was* something peculiar in the world that night, making every sound that went out into it have a silvery ring.

"I've not gone yet, Aunt," said Nora; "so Michael can come with me, if he doesn't mind, as far as Long Ridge. I'm safe enough there."

Michael went to open the gate for her without fully realizing what had been required of him. It was only when Nora had passed out and he had stood pausing an instant afterwards that he did realize it.

Then in letting himself out of the gate to walk near her and to guard her, he almost felt himself one of those heroes with whose chivalric lances Nora had made the dark past flash for him, as she told their stories to the half dozing miller's wife, little knowing whose ears and soul they entered besides.

CHAPTER IV.

MICHAEL'S SILVER NIGHT.

“ How beautiful this night ! The balmiest sigh
That vernal zephyrs breathe in evening's ear
Were discord on the speaking quietude
That wraps this noiseless scene.”

SHELLEY.

WHAT a silent, silver world it was into which they moved as the little gate closed behind them !

Nora thought—“ Ah, if George were with me now, instead of this honest stupid fellow ! ”

Michael thought—“ Then there *are* perfect bits in this imperfect life, and this night is one of them.”

He knew her thoughts were not with him ; but with his own he was able to

follow them tenderly, pitiful in his knowledge that they were not responded to, even at ever so great a distance, by him of whom they were.

If George's thoughts did stray now across those silver downs, were they not perhaps resting in the prison where poor Polly lay; or with the old miller as he slept, filling the darkness of his dream with contending powers of good and evil?

Michael thought the last to be the most likely, for, from what he knew of George, it had always seemed to him that no affection had really remained unshaken in his heart, except that which had grown with him and become a part of his nature. Yet he was not sure of this, for George's connection with the vagrants was all a mystery to Michael, and it was only that wonderful face of Polly's that had planted the idea so firmly in his mind of her having changed George towards Nora.

However this might be, the fair blind

face haunted him along the fields and through the village street, seeming to him to claim George from Nora, and to leave her so much more than she knew alone with Michael. And this feeling gave him a secret sweet triumph, which he condemned, yet rejoiced in.

“So you consider flowers a waste, Michael?” said Nora, who looked on Michael, when not suspicious of him, in much the same light as she did on Fleet-foot and Guarder—that is, as a useful belonging of the High Mills, to whom she was bound to be gracious.

Michael was startled and confused.

He thought Nora had not understood him, and was looking on him as a coarse-minded ignorant lout, who could not appreciate dainty and beautiful things.

He felt so hurt and abashed by the bare idea of such a suspicion in her mind, that it was some time before he could answer.

Thinking what he should say, he looked

round like a child frightened and doubtful of its lesson, and with a sort of helpless appeal for instruction.

Nora saw the look, and was amused by it; but the next moment she was surprised, when his eyes met her own in the clear moonlight, full of gentle joy, and he answered with decision in his full voice—

“No, I was wrong—there is no waste to-night. Everything goes to make the world perfect.”

Nora smiled. She was surprised, and a little puzzled as to how Michael could feel thus in the absence of his beloved; but as she too looked round, the same perfection of silver dewy beauty on the blooming world that had penetrated Michael touched her too, and then she felt pleased with him. She remembered those times when she had come upon him in his fits of meditation and worship, standing with his beard in his hand like an old dervish, all the fresh and tender

lustre of the spring mornings reflected in his eyes, and a smile like quivering April foliage on his face.

Remembering this now, Nora felt a little humbled; not that she was ever very proud to those in a lower position than her own, but she had used to feel herself alone, at the High Mills, in her keen perceptions of such things as she was now learning that a poor ignorant fellow like Michael could have his eyes and soul open to as well.

As they went through past some cottages belonging to her aunt, a little child was kneeling on its cot close to the open upper lattice. Turning its sleepy face from where it had been resting while saying its prayers to its old grandmother, it suddenly caught sight of Michael, and the tiny hands, an instant before clasped in prayer, were stretched out to him with a cry of delighted recognition—

“Hollo, Mital!”

Several more such recognitions as they went along showed Nora that Michael had become quite a favourite at Lamberhurst.

“You seem to be as much at home here, Michael,” said she, “as if you’d lived here all your life.”

“And so I have,” answered Michael, smiling, “that is, all my life that I care for. I believe I have ground out my old self in the master’s mill yonder. I never even dream of my own place, or anything that happened before I came here. It’s all the High Mills and the master’s troubles, and one thing and another.”

“You must be a great comfort to them in their trouble,” said Nora. “And I’m sure, when their son comes home, you will not find him ungrateful to you.”

“I want no one’s gratitude,” answered Michael hastily and almost passionately. “I want to be allowed to work for them.

I want them to see I can, and do, do more than George ever did for them. I want no reward for what I do, more than to have it *some* day forgotten that I'm nothing but a staff to lean on *till* he comes. Is that to be the cry for *ever*? It is too hard."

The words were scarcely gone from Michael's mouth before he felt he would rather have bitten his tongue out than have uttered them.

But he need not have been afraid. Nora's first feeling of astonishment soon gave place to one of pity, generous and outspoken.

They had by this time reached the gate of the meadow leading to Buckholt.

Michael, with an unsteady hand, had opened it, and stood holding it that she might pass through, feeling almost sure that she would do so in angry silence.

He was therefore much amazed and touched when, as the gate closed behind

them, she turned and looked at him with gentle entreaty and sympathy.

“I am not surprised, Michael, that you feel like this,” she said. “I have often wondered at your patience with my poor uncle; and when I see what a support you are to him in this time of trouble, I often wonder how we can repay you, when brighter days come. I’ve seen myself that you have a great liking for him, and that this is your chief reward; and it’s very natural you should be hurt that he does not seem to return your feeling. But, for your own sake, even more than his, I would persuade you—if I could—not to lose heart because they are in too much trouble just now to see your devotion to them in the way they should see it. I say again, Michael, that George Ambray, when he hears how well you have done for them, against your own interests—”

“No! don’t say that. Do not let me deceive you,” Michael interrupted her

suddenly, and she felt the gate tremble as he leant on it. "You mistake me—I do not wish you to think that of me. Not against my own interests, it is not that. I say truly, I have ground out my old life at the High Mills. I have no interests in life *but* what lie here. I was a discontented fool to complain. I hardly know how I came to complain, but I will take your goodness and gentleness to me as enough punishment to keep me from ever doing so again."

"And you'll have patience with them still a little longer?" asked Nora. "It would grieve me to think that they had to lose you just now—till their son returns to them, and——"

"And then I may go to the devil," said Michael with quiet despair.

"'Cline our 'erts!" ejaculated the timid voice of Ma'r S'one, and at the same moment he appeared from behind a hay-rick, and a ray from the lantern he carried showed Nora Michael's eyes.

Their gentleness, and the patient pain in them, withheld her from uttering the cool "good night" that had come to her lips at his last words, and as she saw Ma'r S'one come towards her.

Ma'r S'one walked by them to light them across the field, with such a look of placid infantine sleepiness on his face as made one feel he had but to put his thumb in his mouth to send him right off.

"Well, Michael Swift?" said Nora, after an embarrassing pause. "I'm not going to be angry with you for a fit of impatience, after all your good patience and forbearance. I shall only say again that I trust you may be rewarded for it all, more than you expect."

"You are very good to me," answered Michael—"but," and then he laughed a low laugh that had a pathetic music in it, "I am one o' those unreasonable sort o' fools that care for no possible rewards, and yet live in the hope—no, hardly the *hope*—in the *idea* of impossible ones."

Nora smiled.

“Well, Michael,” she said, “that may be very bad or very good for you. It would be bad to lose a moderately good thing if you fail to get the better thing you are setting it aside for, certainly—but if you *don't* fail, nobody could call you foolish for having looked and aimed beyond what seemed to you the bounds of possibility. I believe it's by refusing to see those bounds, and working in a sort of blind hope, that many men have become great. I believe the greatest things have been done that way.”

“Do you?” asked Michael, bending on her his great eyes, flashing and misty with kindling courage and joy.

Nora felt a thrill of pleasure that her words had had power to comfort and refresh a heart which she imagined suffered silently in much the same fashion as her own.

“I do indeed, Michael,” she answered, speaking more earnestly than she had yet done, and letting her earnestness show itself fully in her uplifted eyes. “I think

that even the very fear that we sometimes have of letting others know a very dear and high hope gives it a greater chance of being realized. However kind people are when we talk to them of what we hope for and try for, they are apt to either throw doubts in our way, or make it appear easier than it really is ; and from being disheartened or too sure about it, we don't try as hard as we should have done if we had kept it to ourselves."

"I understand," replied Michael ; "it's like what might be if we left the shooting-floor windows open in a strong wind—the grist 'ud get blown about like chaff, instead of settling into the shoot and getting down to the grindstone."

"Yes," said Nora, and she laughed and nodded in approval of his illustration, and went in at the garden gate a step or two, but turned and stood waiting kindly while Michael shut it, that she might wish him "good night."

He closed it quietly upon Nora and Ma'r S'one, and when he had done so, leant his arms on it, and remained an instant looking down on the moonlit stones between him and Nora.

"As for my own small—small spark of hope," he said, "it *is* so small, a breath might puff it out—and yet so precious, that while it's above me and I have it to look to, I feel that if my misfortune was twice as great as it is, I could still live and work."

"Then you *have* had some great trouble?" said Nora kindly. "My aunt has often told me she feared so, but seeing you generally so cheerful made me think her wrong."

He bent lower as he rested his arms on the gate, and was for a moment unable to answer her.

"It seems to me sometimes," he said without looking up, "that no man could have a much greater load to go through life with than I have got."

“ But this hope of yours—does not that remove it, if it’s realized ? ” asked Nora.

“ Yes.”

“ Then never part with it, Michael, till it *is* realized.”

“ I shall never forget that *you* have told me this.”

“ Good night, then, Michael ; here’s Ma’r S’one’s going to sleep as he stands.”

At this Ma’r S’one started, and hurried up the garden.

“ Good night, Miss,” said Michael, almost in a whisper. “ I feel I must be made of stone to be able to go without wishing you as much as you have wished me—but——”

Nora thought that he meant he desired to return her good wishes, but did not dare presume to mention ever so vaguely his knowledge of her sore trial.

To-night, however, she felt in a mood that was humble and hopeful enough to make her wistful of any honest encouragement of her hope and faith.

“The best and happiest of us are not above accepting good wishes, Michael,” she said. “You may wish me just what I have wished you.”

“I would rather die, Miss Ambray, than do that.”

Nora, who had turned to go away, felt herself held to the spot by the strange words and voice. Michael had spoken in a low, deep, trembling sort of moan, that seemed to vibrate far away through the silver night.

“You wished me,” said he, as she turned again and looked at him—“you wished me strength to keep to the hope that’s dearest to me. It was a kinder, better, greater wish than you knew. You may know it some day. But that hope of yours—oh! the more I see you, and the better I know you, and the more I think of your goodness and dearness to all, the more I trust that that hope may be taken from you—gently, but quite taken from you—before—before

the shock comes. It seems cruel—cruel—but this is my wish.”

At first Nora had listened in great perplexity and vague foreboding.

Michael’s last words, however, filled her with a fear too strong for restraint, and she exclaimed at once—

“You must know more than you seem to know about George Ambray. You are saying or hinting to me that you are certain he will not return, or that—that things will not be the same. What do you mean, Michael Swift?”

Michael shook his head. He was pale and alarmed to think what words he had uttered in his honest sorrow for her.

“I have seen enough since I came here,” he said hurriedly, “and heard enough surely, to make me take up the cry that’s in everybody’s mouth. It seems awful to say it, but it is only you three who would rather die than give up hopes of him—that *do* believe in his ever coming back, or in his coming back the same.”

"I shall be glad, Michael," said Nora, coldly, and with more decision than he had ever heard or seen in her before, "if you will be kind enough never to speak to me of this again."

"I hope you will forgive me," cried Michael, with a despairing, helpless sort of energy. "I had no right to speak so—your kindness made me forget myself. Yes, I forgot who I was, and thought only of you for the moment. I cannot help hearing what people say. I have heard them talk of George Ambray never coming back, and of this gentleman—this Captain Grahame caring for you so much. I was sorry to-night to hear the master find fault with you about him. I have hoped—all that know you, I believe, except the master, have hoped—but forgive me, I am presuming too far again."

Nora looked as if a proud and indignant reproof was rising to her lips, but instead of uttering it she turned from Michael and

walked towards the house. Her step and bearing seemed to him full of anger, hurt pride and sadness.

A passion to follow Nora and entreat forgiveness on his knees seized Michael as he watched her retreating figure. He pushed the gate open, but as he did so the house door closed on Nora, and he heard the bar drawn, and Mrs. Moon's voice speaking to her in reproachful welcome.

Michael dragged his limbs back to the High Mills with the certain knowledge that an indefinable but great torment had come upon him, and would remain with him till her forgiveness should be asked and won.

This sweet silver night! he thought. What might it have been to remember, to think of all through his life! And now he had by his clumsy outburst filled it with annoyance and humiliation for her, and with sadness and anger for himself.

Yet, with his surmises and fears about George Ambray, intensified as they had been by the sight of poor blind Polly Bardsley, and by her grandfather's efforts to see the miller—with all these thoughts, how utterly impossible it had seemed to be silent !

Weary and sad, and angry with himself, Michael fell asleep, to dream of following Nora through endless dewy fields without ever coming near enough to ask her forgiveness. Sometimes, too, he seemed in his dreams to be trying to get from the blind girl the secret of George's relations with her and her grandfather, but he dreamt she was dumb instead of blind, and only shook her lovely weary head instead of answering him.

When Mrs. Ambray heard him in his troubled sleep pityingly murmur her name, she ran to the miller with that new "fact" in Michael's mysterious love story.

CHAPTER V.

BORN TO TROUBLE.

“Nor to their idle orbs doth light appear
Of sun, or moon, or stars, throughout the year.”

MILTON.

Just twelve years before her cries had interrupted the business of the High Street at Bulver's Bay, Polly Bardsley had made one of a very different assemblage, and had had very different opinions passed upon her.

It was the day when her fate had been decided—a day when after merciful hands having led her into a better path than she had yet in her blind infancy trodden—her wilful little feet had recklessly and passionately, of their own baby will, turned and

fled back to the very path from which she had been drawn, and which had now led her to the prison where she sat—darkness in darkness stamped on her young face.

It was a grand day at the house where the child's kind patrons had placed her, and where she had been three weeks—that great house the space of which caused her to feel ready to cry whenever her small voice ventured forth and made known to her sensitive ear how very far the walls and floors and ceilings were asunder from each other.

A concert was being given by all the blind scholars for whom this great house was built, and of whom Polly was by many years, many inches, and many degrees the youngest, smallest, and most useless. She was the lowliest, too, by birth—a very sparrow of humanity, whose fall from light to darkness had been thus mercifully seen and noted by a Divine eye.

All the morning Polly, sitting winding

cotton for the blind knitters, had heard the preparations for the great occasion going on.

The biggest room of all, where the great organ stood, had been filled with seats, and the two rooms leading out of that were arranged like a bazaar with the wonderful things Polly's blind schoolfellows had made—the mats, the brushes, the baskets, and the needlework, much of which was too delicate for her little fingers to be permitted to touch, and which she could only hear about till she cried with curiosity.

The blind girls and women had done each other's hair with ever so much more carefulness than usual, and chattered and laughed and wondered if this person and that person would be coming to the concert, till Polly likewise began to have small thoughts and hopes and fears of her own about the coming of a person whose existence in the outer world made that world seem all home to her, and whose non-

existence in this place, where she was, made the comfortable house a wilderness.

She had gone into the great room with the others, and taken her place with the singers, under the organ ; and all the seats were filled by the patrons of the place and their friends, and other ladies and gentlemen, and poor people too. The organ played, songs and anthems were sung, and speeches were delivered between whiles, setting forth how much had been done for Polly and her schoolfellows, and how much more was going to be done ; yet Polly's heart never knew one throb of gratitude, knew nothing, indeed, but wild throbs of wonder as to whether a certain wicked old man was here—was coming to her when all this should be over, to take her in his arms for one minute.

The old man was there, and was making himself a nuisance to his neighbours, by repeated inquiries as to whether they did not see a little child among the singers.

“Look agen, Miss, *if* you please,” he urged anxiously to the young lady sitting before him. “She *is* so uncommon small you’d hardly see her at fust.”

To please him, the young lady rose, and said, as she sat down again—

“Oh, yes, I do see a tiny child, quite a baby; a young woman is holding her hand; but she cannot be four years old, I think.”

“Ah, that’s her, Miss, sure enough,” said Bardsley. “Her years ain’t took up much room in her. My little grandchild, Miss.”

When the concert was over, and the people went to look at and purchase the school-work in the outer rooms, the same young lady and her blind brother encountered Bardsley buying himself a pair of warm socks, and waiting—he informed them—till he might obtain permission to visit his little granddaughter. They found the old man much distracted between parental affection and anxiety for the safety of his

dog, whom he had left in charge of a boy outside the door, and whom he urgently commended to the notice of several persons as they left the building.

“Beg pardon, sir,” he was saying to some one as they came up to him, “but would you kindly cast your eye round the toll-gate as you go out, and tell the lucifer boy in charge of a small, long-legged tan dog that he’s bein’ watched, and ’ud better mind what he’s about with that ’ere animal.”

Half an hour later, when Mr. Bardsley’s new acquaintances were waiting in a little parlour to see some one in the establishment with whom an appointment had been made, a blind lad appeared at the door with old Bardsley.

Not noticing their presence, he told the old man to sit down, and his grandchild should be sent to him. Directly he had spoken, however, he knew that the room was already occupied, and apologized for

the intrusion; but the young lady said she should be glad to see the little girl.

“But why is she here?” she asked. “Surely she is not blind with those pretty eyes?”

“Ah, but she is, Miss,” answered the beggar, and added, with a sigh, “and what makes it worse, Miss, she ain’t exactly a so-born, little Polly ain’t, so it don’t come nat’ral to her yet; but as she begins young, we must hope in time she’ll overcome the dislike she ’as to it, and come to look on life as a step and a feeler—which as yet she don’t, but runs and falls and knocks her precious little self about, and frets for her eyes as if they’d bin her mother and her father.”

“But has she not a father and a mother?” they asked.

“Father she’s none, sir and Miss,” replied Bardsley; “and if I could say the same of her mother, better would it be for little Polly, though besides her she’s got but me and Jowler in the world.”

“She isn’t kind, then—little Polly’s mother?”

“She beat her, and would have starved her if that ’ud been easy, which it wasn’t while Jowler and me could drag our limbs along. But for Jowler’s box and my stiffikit, God knows where little Polly would a bin. Under the ground belike along with her father, my poor son, Miss, a so-born like myself; took a fancy to by a sight-gifted young woman, as I was myself before him. She broke his heart, Miss—mainly with bad language to me and Jowler, and unpleasing reflections on the box and stiffikit in hard times. When Polly was born, and he heard she was sight-gifted, he took heart again wonderful, and made mats enough to carpet Jerusalem. We all strove for her, but it’s hard work striving against a tartar, a drunkard, and a thief. At last she got herself took and transported, and Polly’s sight went, and her father sunk under it all, and——”

Here Mr. Bardsley was interrupted by the opening of the door, and the entrance of little Polly herself.

The blind girl who brought her put her timidly into the room, and closed the door behind her.

Polly was indeed a small creature, whose every garment was in itself a wonder. A mere frill of preposterously few inches seemed her black skirt from her waist to the tiny socks which, tiny as they were, found themselves too large to keep up round the little leg, in despair whereof they fell over the tops of Polly's well-worn boots, where they lay in a limp and helpless state. Little Polly assuredly did not possess the attractions which her grandfather hinted as having been the portion of himself and son. It might be said with some truth, perhaps, that the child's affliction was the only thing which then gave her significance.

Her grandfather had risen at her entrance, and now stood, hat in hand, waiting,

listening for her approach as impressively as if she had been a duchess.

The child still remained on the same spot where she had been left, and where she stood with uplifted listening face and little hands clasped before her; patiently waiting that guidance without which she had not yet learned to move. It was touching to see them facing each other without knowing it, and waiting passively each other's assistance. At last the smallest voice imaginable inquired, with a sweet patience, "Is my daddy here?"

At this, old Bardsley went to her as direct as if led by the truest of eyes, stooped, took her in his arms, and returning to his chair sat down with her while she lay upon his neck, an arm cast loosely over each shoulder, her face flat against his old coat, in what seemed to be an excess of peace and contentment rather than any childish emotion. Mr. Bardsley prided himself too much on his personal

dignity to give way long to the feelings which had overcome him at the meeting with his little grandchild. Drawing down her hands, and seating her on his knee, he began to stroke her light hair with one hand, while he held her small chin in the other.

“You see here, sir and Miss,” he said, “you see here a little creetur born to trouble if ever a creetur were.”

And if ever a creature looked it, Polly did, with her meekly drooping head, her useless blue eyes, and her small mouth drawn up so tightly, as if every breath of life had too sour a taste for it to take more than it found positively necessary.

“And is little Polly happy in this place?” asked the lady, scarcely knowing in what manner to reply to Mr. Bardsley’s introduction of her.

A slight turn of the head and a faint flush showed Polly’s ear as sensitive as her eyes were dull. She looked for one moment embarrassed and timidly inquisi-

tive, but the next the remembrance of the value of the few brief minutes she had to be with her grandfather came over her; and, turning a stubborn little back towards the strangers, she devoted her whole attention to caressing his hands, his buttons, and his long grey beard.

“Come, come,” said Bardsley, vainly endeavouring to make her turn her face, “speak up, pretty. Polly’s nice and comfortable here, ain’t she?”

Polly leant upon his breast that he might feel the meek little nod which was her answer.

“She has good wittles, eh?”

Polly nodded again.

“And she’s a learnin’ to read with her fingers?”

At this Polly lifted her head up with the injured dignity of one whose powers had been undervalued, and said, “I can ’ead a lot, daddy, ’out my fingers, ’out a book at all, ’bout Jesus and Herod and Judee.”

“Oh, ah, that ain’t readin’, that’s knowin’ by ’art, Polly,” rejoined her grandfather. “But Polly’s agoing to learn to read with her fingers all off pat without stopping, like old Ames that sits in the square with the big Bible, and mumbles the Scriptures when he hears anybody comin’. I dunno how his dog stands it. I know Jowler wouldn’t. Well, and Polly stands up and sings with the rest of ’em. My gracious!”

Polly flushed with pleasure, and kissed the button she was fondling.

“Did hoo ’ear me, daddy? I sung in ‘Joyful, joyful.’”

“Did I hear her! I shud say so rather. Well, if Polly didn’t ought to be a proud and happy little girl!” said Bardsley. “Why, she’s not got a thing to wish for.”

This last proved an unlucky assertion, as it invariably is even to the most happy and grateful. It was certainly too much for Polly, “born to trouble.” The little fingers engaged in trying to coax the worn covering

back over one of Bardsley's buttons, of which they had felt the brassy nakedness, were slowly withdrawn. Slowly they clutched the wee skirt of Polly's black frock, and drew it up and found beneath it, safely attached by one corner, and illustrated with the legend of the rats who decided to bell the cat, a pocket-handkerchief.

It was a handkerchief which, in Polly's sight-gifted days, had been an inexhaustible delight to her and to Jowler; whose sagacity in discovering that it was *that* handkerchief and no other which he was expected to scratch and bark at when she shook it and said, "Rats! rats!" had always concealed from Polly his utter want of appreciation of the artist's truth to nature. Now that the little washed-out relic of happier days could gladden Polly's eyes no more, she was content to keep it to dry them of their tears, of which they knew no few.

Trembling with that bitter charge of having nothing to wish for, Polly lifted the

rats in council to her cheek, and, pressing close to her grandfather, sobbed with more passion than one would have thought sorrow had left in her—

“Oh, daddy, daddy, I tood ’ike my eyes! I *tood* ’ike my eyes! and I wants to go home, and I can’t stay here!”

The old man was much disturbed. He clasped her with arms that trembled, and rocked her against his breast, and the eyes which had never shed a tear over their own darkness, let fall some heavy drops for Polly’s. Recovering himself very soon, and trying to make her sit up, he said—

“Come, come, Polly. Why, I never would have thought it. Fie, for shame! What will the young lady think of you?” And, turning to her, he added apologetically, “She’ll be herself again in a minute, Miss. This is what comes of not bein’ a so-born, you see.”

It did not seem that Mr. Bardsley’s prophecy was likely to be very soon fulfilled,

for Polly continued crying bitterly in spite of attractions offered her in the shape of a watch held against her ear, a cake put into her hand, and sundry articles from her grandfather's pockets, picked up in his street wanderings.

Her crying would probably have brought some one into the room soon, and caused a sudden and sad ending to her grandfather's visit, if there had not presently arrived a comforter whose loud scratching and barking outside the door made everybody start, and was instantly recognized by Polly.

"Oh, daddy," she cried, sitting up joyfully, "it's Jowler! it's Jowler!"

"Upon my soul, if I don't believe it is," said Bardsley with much alarm; "there'll be a nice set out."

The young lady, who was not so fearful of offending against the rules of the establishment, opened the door, and in burst Jowler.

Polly slid from her grandfather's knee,

and meeting her old friend half-way, sat down on the floor to receive his wild caresses, which she answered with smiles and soft little pats. She seemed to think his frantic joy quite accounted for by his possession of that sense of which she was deprived; for as she gently restrained him she said with a tender envy in her voice—

“Jowler, Jowler, *dear* Jowler, you *are* p’eased. You *see* me, don’t you, Jowler?”

By degrees she got him quiet, so that she might feel him all over, to assure herself he was in nowise changed from the Jowler her eyes had loved.

Jowler stood with lolling tongue gazing round from the corners of his eyes with unutterable affection on the little hands that were so inconveniencing him, and submitted to their examination with quite supercanine patience till they came round to his tail, when he offered a gentle but decided resistance.

“And he’s bin a good Jowler, has he?”

inquired Polly, holding up her favourite by the front paws.

During the twelve years that had intervened between this visit of Bardsley to the blind-school and his visit to the High Mills, some three or four Jowlers had worn out their lives in the old man's hard service. Of these it was in all probability the Jowler of Polly's infancy who was the true hero of the story that had been related to Michael Swift, though Bardsley was in the habit of applying it to any dog who happened to be in his service. The vices and virtues of a live dog must, he reasoned, inevitably be of more interest to the public than those of a dead one ; and if he could amuse the public, and even edify it, as he sometimes believed he did by his anecdotes of dog-life and dog-character, he did not see that he harmed any one by letting his hearers believe that they had the true hero of those anecdotes before them. For this reason he had found it necessary to keep to the same name.

When Polly asked about Jowler's behaviour since her absence from home, Bardsley told the story of the "pouncing" and the "stiffikit" in nearly the same words in which he told it to Michael twelve years later.

While he did this Polly sat quiet with a patient, half-weary look on her face. Even in those days it was an old, old story to her.

At the moment when Jowler, after the recital, was receiving the pats and applause of all present, the young woman who had brought in little Polly came back to summon her to tea, and to inform Mr. Bardsley that the doorkeeper was waiting to see him out.

The little one had her arms round Jowler's neck when the summons came.

In an instant she was up, kneeling on her grandfather's knee, her hands clutching him tightly.

"Tea, eh," he said, making a bold effort to quiet her emotion by seeming not to share or perceive it. "Buns, too, *I* bet a penny,

as it's high day and holiday. My little Polly havin' tea and buns along of a lot of ladies and gentlemen. What yer think o' that, Jowler?"

Jowler only wagged his tail with a pre-occupied air, for he was intent on a bag of biscuits on the table.

"I *doesn't* want tea, and I *doesn't* want buns—I wants you and Jowler," was Polly's cry of misery; and she clung and pressed against the beggar's tough old heart till its slow beating quickened painfully.

Afraid of trusting himself to comfort her, he rose and gave her into the girl's arms just as she was, in her tears and struggles, and she was carried out.

Her grandfather adjusted the string round Jowler's neck, and gave him to understand, by the roughness of his touch, that he was again on duty; that sentiment had been banished with little Polly, and the hard business of life was now to begin.

Polly was put to bed long before it was

dark. She knew it was not near night, by the talking and the laughter in the work-rooms, and by the vague red glare she saw when she turned towards the windows, for as yet Polly could tell light from darkness, and sometimes see a form or a colour suddenly, and generally but for a moment.

She could not rest. The day's excitement, the joy of meeting Bardsley, the sorrow of parting from him, the playing of the organ, as she had stood so close under it, the overmuch wandering and ruminating alone which she had had that day, the crowds, the many voices, the unusual influence of strong tea and coffee which had been given her instead of milk and water on this great and confusing occasion, all acting together on little Polly's weak brain and passionate heart, made sleep impossible—her bed a rack.

She got up and crept to the door, from the door to the top of the stairs, and stood listening.

People were walking about still, the organ was playing, the great front doors were open, wheels were noisy in the streets, little children shouted and laughed there—ah, how free and happy Polly thought them !

Why should she not go down the stairs and slip through the great doors—away for ever from this grand place with its awful organ—this wide-roomed house, so clean, so good, so dull, so miserably strange ?

Would any one notice her ? All seemed so busy. There were many little girls come with the visitors ; she might be taken for one of them if she slipped out quietly, but then she must put on her clothes, for no little girl would be there in her night-dress, Polly remembered.

She ran back and dressed herself as well as she could, then went to the stairs again, and listened.

Bardsley shared the room which he had occupied since Polly's birth with a bird-

seller, known among his friends by the name of "Traps." It happened that on the night of Polly's grand day this person was obliged to be up late, painting two greenfinches to sell in the streets as valuable foreign birds.

Bardsley, being nothing loth to have some one to whom he could describe the grandeur of Polly's school and Polly's prospects, had kept his friend company; while Jowler, a miracle of patience and self-sacrifice, sat winking and gaping between the two, and trying hard not to look at the birds, which he had had the mortification of seeing fattening for sale on hempseed for the last week.

"Traps," said Bardsley, suddenly interrupting himself in his description of Polly's delight on meeting him, "that's the second time I've heered it."

"Heerd wot?" inquired Traps, holding off the painted finch by the feet, and contemplating it with the eyes of a connoisseur,

while Jowler retired, sick with temptation, to the furthest end of the room.

“That noise,” said Bardsley, rising ; “like a lot o’ people down at the door. There ! they’re on the stairs ; they’re a-coming up ; they’re coming here.”

Traps uttered an exclamation which implied their coming was the reverse of welcome to him, and, thrusting the bird into its cage, covered his paints with Bardsley’s old woollen comforter, and took up his pipe.

Meanwhile Bardsley opened the door, and found the whole houseful of lodgers crowded round a policeman, who had something in his arms.

It was Polly ; and Traps, listening sulkily, made out from the confusion of tongues that she had been found feeling her way along by the palings, half a mile down the road where the school for the blind was, that she had given her grandfather’s address with extreme exactness, and de-

manded with great energy to be taken there, and nowhere else.

Bardsley, with a strange expression on his face, came and took Jowler's money-box, and emptied out all its contents in the policeman's hand.

He then brought Polly in, and shutting the door in the face of all who would fain have entered and heard the story of her return, stood her on the floor, and seating himself remained for a moment with his face buried in his hands.

Traps caring only that the people had gone, and that the door was shut, opened the cage and resumed the bird and the paint-brush, observing with complacency—

“If this ain't took for a Java sparrer, it'll be 'cos there never was no Java sparrer to come up to it.”

“Polly,” said Bardsley, suddenly lifting his face, “come here!”

She went and placed her hands upon his knees.

Polly had in her hasty dressing been unable to fasten her clothes round her shoulders, so that Bardsley drawing her to him found them bare. He began to beat them with so heavy and passionate a hand, that Traps in his astonishment obliterated a scarlet spot he had made with great effect on the greenfinch's wing, and stared round.

"Traps!" cried Bardsley, almost fiercely, as he stood trembling over Polly when she had cast herself, stricken with terror and exhaustion, at his feet. "Traps, you are a witness as I have done my dooty by this child. I moved the world to get her in that place—you know it, Traps—and now when she's wickedly run away, I've beat her—I've beat her till she's dropt. You see it, Traps, if that ain't dooty I'd like to know what is! But now that's over come to me, my precious—my darling! and let what can part us two agen."

"Ah, Traps! it's no good goin' agen fate. She was born to trouble—which means to

me. I tried to put her away from trouble and from me, but it don't do, you see, Traps—it don't do."

The old man put forth the same plea on that night twelve years afterwards, when Polly had cried herself to sleep upon the prison straw, and his own heart and brain were restless and tormenting.

"I tried to put her away from it all," he kept crying inwardly, "but it didn't do—Traps knows it didn't do."

CHAPTER VI.

THE PRISONERS.

“Cunning, when it is once detected, loses its force, and makes a man incapable of bringing about even those events which he might have done, had he passed only for a plain man.”—ADDISON.

BEFORE it was light the next morning Bardsley was disturbed by his granddaughter being brought to his cell.

She had been locked in for the night with three drunken and riotous women, who towards morning had quarrelled so violently that Polly had been frightened, and had wakened the gaoler by her entreaties to be let out ; he, not knowing where else to put her, and remembering Bardsley was alone, had brought her to him.

Polly was much too weary to be capable

of showing her gratitude for the change in any other way than falling into a peaceful sleep.

When this had lasted about two hours Bardsley began to have little fits of coughing, to walk about and stumble, as if he wished to waken her without seeming even to himself to do so purposely.

It was necessary that Polly should begin without loss of time to receive her instructions as to how she must behave when they should be taken before the magistrate, how she must swear to having suddenly lost her sight at such a time and in such a place, and how she must guide her statement according as the evidence for and against them should go.

Perhaps she would have to swear to having lost her sight before in one or more of those towns which might send witnesses against her, and consequently swear to having recovered it again as many times as might be necessary.

Bardsley had during his sleepless night thought out all Polly's lesson with much diligence, and was impatient to teach it to her before they were disturbed.

He had never felt himself so much to blame before, as he did for having been so carried away by the repeated successes of Polly's street scene as to venture it here, so near to the High Mills, which formed the real aim of his and Polly's pilgrimage, whereon they had found their daily bread in this fearful manner.

The story that he had come to tell the miller of Lamberhurst would assuredly have to remain untold if Polly and he were to be proved guilty in this town. There would have to be months, or, likely enough, years of waiting, until the case should be forgotten—and perhaps it might never be forgotten in such a place as this.

He felt, on considering all these things, that his hopes, and the future he had pictured for Polly, must indeed be ruined

unless his own cunning and good luck should bring them safely out of the dangers into which his hardihood and Polly's "fit" of yesterday had thrown them.

But if Polly would learn her lesson well, if she would but wake free from all the excitement and confusion that had seized her yesterday, Bardsley believed he could so manage their case that, however much might be suspected, nothing could be actually proved against them.

It was the old man's besetting fault to put too much faith in his own wits and the dulness of the world; and sharp experiences of its dangers had not in the least degree tended to cure him of this fault.

The straw on which Polly lay was spread upon the stone floor, and on this Bardsley at last sat down beside her, to wait for her awakening, and gently to hasten it by passing his hand over her face and hair.

He had not done so many times when his fingers began to tremble. He withdrew

them, and sat with his head bent and his face darkening.

It was not that the coldness of Polly's cheek had made his heart misgive him for her health's sake ; he knew by her gentle breathing, and the moisture on her brow, she was recovering from the shock of yesterday, as she had recovered from so many similar shocks before.

It was, that his fingers had gone to her face as, but for his blindness, his eyes would have done, full of the question—Would it all be well with Polly when she should wake ? Would she perjure herself this time meekly and obediently as she had done before ?

He had asked this as he had touched her, and had taken a chilling answer from her face.

He had seemed to feel something like severity in the cold and still repose of the eyelids and the mouth—something that made him fancy Polly had not wholly

returned to her usual meek and dependent spirit—that she had things in her mind, in her dreams, strange to him and against him.

Again he touched the mouth he had fed so long with the wages of his blindness and beggary, and again it seemed strange to him and chilled him. Its perfection felt to him like the seal of truth upon it—cold, firm, unbreakable.

Bardsley was imaginative and superstitious, but he thought this had nothing to do with his fears concerning Polly. He thought, with his usual self-conceit, that he had the power of feeling expression, and that Polly's face was expressing some thought or dream injurious to him.

He got up and moved to and fro in the cell with confused and unsteady feet, but in less than a minute came again to where his grandchild lay, and crouching down beside her, his hands clutching each other tremblingly, he uttered her name in a voice hoarse with superstitious fear.

“Polly!”

She woke, and rose upon her elbow.

To see Polly's awakening on this or almost any morning was to guess at what was generally regarded as another misfortune in her, almost as great as her blindness, but which was perhaps the chief blessing with which the child had been endowed.

Polly had not nearly an ordinary share of sense. It was as if her Creator, considering into what evil and unclean company her mind would fall, had mercifully kept it as a bud never to expand; closed tightly to all cankerous things and baleful airs, so that day after day it might be steeped in mire which should fall from it, leaving it unsullied and pure within; for with Polly it was very seldom that anything sank deep or rankled.

She scarcely had even memory to trouble her. Sleep would generally banish from her any day's sorrow, and leave her spirit

fresh and bright as a blade of grass which the drop of dew all night upgathered on its point has fallen over in the morning, and left glistening.

There were times when it seemed, as by some magic touch, to open for a little while and be penetrated by a mysterious vague sense of the misery by which it was surrounded.

It was one of these unwonted fits that had seized it yesterday and filled Polly's cry—begun in hypocrisy—with such true and bitter anguish.

When Bardsley called her, she woke at once as innocently and brightly as anything on earth might wake, rising towards him, smiling, and stretching her little hand, the substitute for her blind eyes, to his face.

He could know nothing of how sweet her pretty, rich-fringed eyes were, or how the sunshine glorified her hair, claiming it—all abased and trailed on prison stones though it was—as one of the shining treasures of

the morning and the spring ; but her waking and her touch comforted him greatly.

“ I’m glad you’ve slep’ well, Polly,” he said, trying to maintain a dignified composure of countenance under her attentive fingers, as he sat down at her side, and laid his hand on her shoulder. “ I’m very glad, indeed ; for there ain’t nothing like sleep to shake a person together agen, when they’ve shook themselves to pieces, as you did yesterday—both your own self and me, Polly. *I* ain’t slep’ at all, now, all night—not a wink ; it warn’t in me ; but I’m truly glad as *you* could, Polly—truly glad.”

And Bardsley sighed with a sort of philosophical resignation, as if adding mentally, “ So is it ever in this world—the innocent must suffer for the guilty.”

His voice and his words brought all the bitter truth at once into Polly’s mind. With it came also one of those strange, brief flashes of inner sight which allowed her to see herself and her life.

Her morning freshness and cheerfulness were gone. Horror and self-pity came over her, her eyes filled with tears, and she threw herself face downwards on the straw and began a dreary wailing, which moved Bardsley with impatience and irritation.

“Oh, well, if that’s to be it, Polly,” he said in a voice sternly contemptuous, “I must let things go as they will. It’s no good one strivin’ and strainin’ while t’other lays down and howls. Now I tell you once for all, Polly, if this goes wrong with us, as you seem set on letting it, I’m done for. I could ha’ wish to see you better provided for, afore I meets your poor father, but my efforts for you, Polly, is come to a end, if the worst comes to the worst on this occasion. I’m an old man, Polly, which on account o’ the energy I puts out for your sake you’re apt to forget; but age is age, and can’t stand a blow like this.”

Here Bardsley tried the effect of a little smothered but very audible sobbing himself.

Polly's wailing ceased ; the weary, down-cast little form drew itself up and nestled at his side. The hem of Polly's wretched gown was applied with gentle vigour to Bardsley's eyes—an attention as unpleasant to him as it was unnecessary, but which he bore with Christian fortitude, and rewarded Polly for by receiving her somewhat stiffly in the arm against which she leaned.

“ I don't want to scold you, Polly. I'm well aware as you're not strong, and can't reckon on your mind in the right place and the right time, and it ain't for *my* sake but your own hintirely as I could wish for you to break off this sort o' childish way you has of roaring out over a bit o' trouble, which, as I've told you often, is a thing as we're all born to, and as runs in your own family most perticklerly.

“ I ain't bin able, it's true, to give you such a edgercation as you'd a had if you'd stayed at the place I moved the world to get you inter ; but I do take credit to myself,

Polly, for trying to keep you well up in one lesson as I've learnt by harder ways than I've tried to learn it to you—a lesson, Polly, as the teachin' of is much neglected in all circles—and that is, the *accepting* of trouble as a *fact*, as a thing you must expect to meet anywheres and everywheres, as certainly as a party you might 'appen to owe a small sum to—as take the case of the 'ketch-'em-alive-O' man I borrered sixpence of last June, where could I turn a corner without finding myself stuck to his fly-papers? But I expected him, Polly, and dodged him as I'd have you expect and dodge trouble, which is as real and sticky as fly-papers, and, no doubt, set by a judicious Providence as knows it wouldn't do for us to be all in the sugar-basin at once."

Polly listened meekly, thankful to hear the old man fall into his habitual preaching tone, to which she was so well used. But Bardsley, at the first pause he made, became aware of how he had been wasting the few

precious moments which remained for him to teach Polly her part in the day's performance.

He erected himself with as much dignity as he could in his lowly position on the floor, and assumed a brisker tone.

“But what I was goin’ to say to you, Polly, is, as it’s of the most wital importance as you shud rec’lect to-day you are no longer a child, but a growed-up young woman with responsibilities, with more responsibilities—some desirable, others not—than most young women of your age.”

Polly sighed. She knew that it boded no good to her when Bardsley began to speak of her responsibilities—knew well it was a token that some unpleasant task was about to be assigned to her.

Bardsley began at once to make known to Polly what he had so carefully considered as best for her to do and say. He restrained his usual volubility, and managed to convey his thoughts and wishes, or com-

mands, very simply and clearly to Polly, so that she could not fail to understand him.

When he had finished he did not feel any surprise at finding her silent and motionless for some minutes, for he knew that Polly often hesitated to speak too quickly, for fear he should charge her—as he often did, and justly—with answering from her quick heart without having received the sense of what he had said into her slow mind at all.

He waited patiently.

At last the thought of how many minutes must have passed since the ceasing of his own voice, troubled him suddenly. The doubts he had felt, the strange fear he had had when he touched her face, as she slept, returned to him all at once as the strangeness of her silence came over him like a bitter chill.

Why, he wondered, did he hesitate to speak to her, to stretch his arm towards her? He could not tell, but he did hesitate till the silence lengthened painfully.

At last he moved his arm, and found that she had gone away from his side. Then a cry with anger in it as well as fear broke from him.

“Poll, why don’t yer answer me?”

Straining his ears as he half sat, half lay with his face stretched forward, he heard her quick, excited breathing.

“Answer me, Polly,” he cried less angrily, more beseechingly. “Tell me as you’ll do what I said you must do. Answer me.”

From the corner towards which a vague instinct had caused him to turn his face Polly’s voice came at last, low, so low he could but just hear it, and heavily burthened with misery—

“I can’t do it, daddy. I can’t swear as I seed the light.”

The voice seemed to creep tremblingly along the prison floor, so that he knew Polly was cast down in great distress in that corner to which she had taken herself.

“Who is it,” he asked hoarsely, “a-speaking to me like that? It’s never Polly?”

“I can’t swear as I seed the light; it is me as ses it, daddy.”

“It is!” cried Bardsley, quivering on his elbow, and speaking in a voice of solemn anger. “Then what evil speret is a-tempting of you to speak and to be’ave like this, Polly, in return for all I’ve done for yer?”

Polly was silent. She could not tell him what spirit it was. She could not understand herself, and was still less able to describe to him these moments of mental and spiritual seeing; when she beheld her wretched little life with such passionate consternation, counting up her miseries, and making moan over herself as some opium-dulled mother, free for a few moments from her stupor, might wail over her starving and ill-used babe.

Polly was not moaning now; her tears were falling fast and silently on the thin

little arms that pillowed her face as she lay cast down upon the stones.

“Come, Polly,” said Bardsley in a conciliatory but intensely anxious voice, “you’ve got one of your crazy fits on—throw it off, Polly, throw it off.”

It was one of Polly’s trials to have these times of terrible sanity called madness—for Bardsley never thought them anything else, though often during them she wailed out some bitter truth to him.

The only answer that she could make now was a repetition of the cry—

“Daddy, I can’t swear as I seed the light.”

“So,” said Bardsley, after remaining some time in angry silence, “Polly is a-goin’ to ruin her old grandfather, is she? And for a whim—a fit o’ nonsense?”

“No; it’s ’cos I can’t, daddy—I can’t swear as I seed the light.”

“And why can’t yer, you unnatural, wicked gal? Why can’t yer? Don’t roar; but answer me why can’t yer?”

“’Cos I’se afraid God A’mighty won’t never again let me see if I do—if I swears I ’as when I ’asn’t.”

By the burning of Polly’s cheeks in uttering this, it might have been a most shameful confession. It required no little bravery on her part to utter it; for she knew it would bring Bardsley’s ridicule upon her, as indeed it did, promptly and bitterly, in a laugh and an oath together.

At this she sobbed aloud.

“’Nough o’ that row, now!” cried Bardsley sternly. “I see wot it is—it’s that confounded school nonsense a-workin’ in yer ’ead. Now, Polly, is it possible as you can’t yet bring yer mind to understand wot I’ve told yer so many times as to the subjec’ of the same religion not being conformable to all speres o’ life? Now, I arst yer to put it to yerself like a sensible gal, Polly. Take the case of a—a—a statement of a fact as isn’t a fact. Well, now, do you mean to say

on yer honour, Polly, it's the same thing whether it's done ter save a person from ruin, or whether it's done by a fine lady in her drarin'-room 'earin' a double knock at the door, and reflectin' she ain't got her best cap on, or fancyin' she got a glimpse out o' winder of an old gown as she gave seven year ago to a poor relation as may ha' come down thinkin' it's time the bounty was renooed? Now, I arst yer, Polly, do you think it's the same?"

As Polly at the best of times was incapable of argument, she did not attempt any answer to this perplexing question.

"Depend on it, Polly," continued Bardsley. "God A'mighty 'ud a great deal rather you'd save your old grandfather from ruin than be a puffin' up yer 'eart with religion at such a ilconvenient time as this. I'd always have yer say yer prayers, Polly, and believe in a Providence above as wisits awful retribution on all as furgits

the blind, or in anyways worrits 'em, and as is something to look to when all else fails. But fur people in our station to be expectin' to keep to a religion which I've heered is as much or more than them in the 'ighest circles can live up to, why, it's rank presumption, Polly, and nothink else."

If continuing in the same determination might be called presumption, Polly remained presumptuous still, for Bardsley had no sooner ceased speaking than she again put forth her feeble, drawling, but obstinate cry—

"I can't swear as I seed the light!"

"Then don't!" shouted Bardsley fiercely.

"Ruin yerself and ruin me, you ——".

And he launched at Polly such a selection of epithets as none but one brought up like herself, with very free and liberal ideas of language, could hear without horror. Even with these ideas Polly was much shocked and shaken; for it is certain that the accepting a vocabulary as being right

and proper, and the having its hardest words hurled at oneself, are two very different things. A more piteous lamentation arose from her corner, and Bardsley's fierce abuse smouldered down to a low and ominous muttering.

Suddenly he got up and felt his way to the corner where Polly was.

"Polly," he said, holding his rage in strong control as he stood over her, "as nothing else can turn you from this wicked state of mind, I shall be compelled to tell yer what I didn't wish to say nothing about to yer yet, but now I can't 'elp myself; so set up and stop this howling, and I'll tell yer what I have brought yer down to this — place for."

Polly sat up.

"Are you a-listenin'?" asked Bardsley sharply.

"Yes, daddy."

He paused for some time, leaning his shoulder against the wall.

"I 'spose you 'ain't guessed at all wot I did come down here for, Polly?"

"No," answered Polly with a sigh, which seemed to express a heartfelt opinion that, whatever the journey was for, it had been a great mistake.

"Well, I've come after that scamp," said Bardsley, "that's wot I've come after, Polly."

He bent his head, endeavouring to detect by breath or movement any effect his words might have had on Polly.

An unnatural stillness was over the little form at his feet. Whether it denoted surprise, consternation, pleasure, or indifference, Bardsley could not tell.

"Did you hear me, Polly?" he asked. "Do you understand where we're a-goin' when we git out of here?"

"T' High Mills," answered Polly in a weary voice that might have come from one thrice her age.

"Exactly so," said Bardsley.

He waited then for something more from Polly, but she remained silent.

He was clearing his throat preparatory to giving her more information concerning the purport of their journey, when he felt Polly's hands flung on his feet, and heard her voice choked with sobs, crying—

“Don't, don't, don't, daddy! Don't go there; don't go there, and I'll swear I seed the light; only don't go there, don't go there.”

Bardsley drew back a step.

“Polly,” he said sternly, “I don't know you: there's nothink of you left but whims.”

He was agitated, and spoke only to hide his agitation. He *did* know her at that moment as well as he knew himself. He understood, much too well for his peace of mind, the kind of struggle that was making her writhe at his feet.

He knew that every instinct of self-respect or honour which her hard life had left in her would be moved to strong and

bitter rebellion against the threatened visit to the mills; and he knew also how much too simple she was to perceive that remaining true to her purpose of not swearing that she had recovered her sight was the surest way of preventing this visit.

But though for a little while Bardsley was moved by this simplicity in her, he did not scruple to take cruel advantage of it, as it was for this very thing that he had made what would appear to be so unwise a revelation to Polly.

“Very well, Polly,” he said, crouching down and patting her shoulder, “then that’s our bargain, eh? You swears us out o’ this like a brave good lass as you are, and has yer own way ever after.”

Polly submitted to his conciliatory pats like a lifeless creature. She was so strange, that he judged it best to say nothing for several moments.

He had no pangs of conscience in thus cheating one whom it was so very easy to

cheat, but reasoned with himself that weak things like Polly were not to be managed at all without such stratagems.

What was she doing, he wondered, with her face down against the stones, so silent and so still? Taking leave, perhaps, of that far-away, strange thing she called the light, which she thought she must no more hope to see after this day when her lips were to swear falsely concerning it.

“Innercint little fool,” thought Bardsley, sending up his ragged coat-cuff to do his eyes a necessary service, “as if—if there *was* anythink to pay for this sort o’ thing—Providence wouldn’t send in the bill ter *me*; and a long un it ’ud be—Lord ’elp me!”

CHAPTER VII.

THE ORGAN.

“Trembling he sat, and, shrunk in abject fears,
From his vile visage wiped the scalding tears.”

HOMER.

WHILE Bardsley was waiting and listening for Polly to move, he heard the sound of keys rattling and bolts being drawn in the direction of the front of the building. Apparently some doors were opened, for immediately afterwards the sound of a fine organ penetrated to the cell where they were.

Bardsley knew it was the old organist practising in the church on the other side of the narrow street in which the prison stood. He and Polly had been humbly admiring listeners to this early performance every morning since their

arrival at Bulver's Bay. Indeed, the old man had found it rather a profitable kind of amusement, for the organist was only too happy to buy a pennyworth a day of such profound and ecstatic admiration as the blind man's face and waving hands testified, while Polly drooped and wept with childish memories, or lifted up her face sweet and smiling with a renewal of childish hopes, and Jowler outside in the churchyard stood first on one tombstone and then another in sculpturesque attitudes, trying to see in at the windows, wondering what was going on, and having a gnawing suspicion of breakfast.

When Bardsley heard the grand sound coming as the angel came to Peter, calmly triumphant over bars and bolts and all prison fastnesses, he growled a curse upon the white-haired player, for he knew it would disturb Polly again with thoughts of her babyish school-days.

He was not wrong. In a minute she

lifted her face from the stones. She rose to her elbow—to her knee—to her feet, pausing to listen between each movement.

She stood listening, her arms crossed, a hand laid on each shoulder, hugging the memory of that little pure white cape of the blind-school uniform, which might have kept the wilful heart as pure, had she not cast it off so wantonly.

Bardsley knew, felt fully how excited she was growing, and expected each instant she would cry out to him and give him more trouble.

She did cry out, in mingled passion, misery, and triumph, but not to him.

“O our Father!” cried Polly, “Our Father ’chart’n ’eaven! I won’t swear as I seed the light!”

At that moment Bardsley heard the rattling of keys close outside the door, and voices, from which he made out that the gaoler had brought himself into trouble by placing them together.

The door was presently opened, and then the glory of the angel that had come to Polly's succour rushed in and filled the cell.

Bardsley leapt to his feet, blaspheming and stretching out his arms, more in impotent desire to wrestle for Polly's tender spirit, with those sweet and powerful sounds, than to offer any resistance to the men who had come to take her weary form away from him for but an hour or two.

Another moment and the door was closed again, and a lonely mass of rags lay heaving on the prison floor.

CHAPTER VIII.

MA'R S'ONE'S NEWS. .

“Close, close it is pressed to the window,
As if those childish eyes
Were looking into the darkness,
To see some form arise.”

LONGFELLOW.

DAY after day Michael watched the richness of summer increasing about his new world.

The two questions that weighed upon his heart remained unanswered, and troubled him, sleeping and waking. Nothing had occurred to show him whether Nora had been hopelessly offended by his words on that strange night. Nothing had given him any clue as to Bardsley's intentions. He did not know whether the old man

and his grandchild were still in prison, or what had become of them.

Strangely enough Ma'r S'one was the first to enlighten him on this matter.

One evening, about a week after their visit to Bulver's Bay, Michael shut up the mill early, whistled to Guarder, and went some miles along the Tidhurst road to meet and walk home with Ma'r S'one, whom he expected to be returning about this time.

The old man had been sent off to Tidhurst cattle fair early that morning, greatly overburdened and saddened by the charge of a fine hog of fourteen stone, which, in consequence of a suspicion of measles, Mrs. Moon had desired to have sold immediately, and at its fullest price.

He appeared to be greatly surprised and touched by Michael's attention in coming to meet him and relieving him of some heavy farm implements which he had had to purchase at Tidhurst and carry home.

As they walked along together, Ma'r S'one's repeated sighs and solemn shakes of the head led Michael to fear that he and his errand had met with the very worst of bad luck, and that he had real cause for being alarmed at meeting Mrs. Moon. He forebore questioning him, feeling sure it would not be many minutes before the old man would confide his trouble to him. Without seeming to loiter for him, he suited his strong step to Ma'r S'one's uncertain, plodding trot.

"Stopped at th' aarf-way 'saarfternoon, Ma'rs Michael," he began presently, evidently finding walking and talking at once a great labour, and more than his breath could manage without much trouble.

"Ah," said Michael, well knowing that Ma'r S'one alluded to the old half-way house between Lamberhurst and Tidhurst, where the coaches used to stop before the railway came to Bulver's Bay. "Well, you're no bad judge, Mr. Ma'r S'one.

Old Piggot's alè's the best in Southdownshire. When I go by every Wednesday I have a glass regularly."

"Ay, ay, I thart ye did," said Ma'r S'one, with a little sudden, sprightly mischief in his eye and voice. "I thart ye did, Ma'rs Michael."

"*You* thought I did? Why, how in the world should you know?" asked Michael.

"I wur round there with your maister in the waggon o' Friday marnin'," answered Ma'r S'one, shaking his head slyly; "and Fleetfoot he drared up grandly at th' aarf-way—grandly, he did."

While Michael wondered for some minutes why Ambray had not spoken to him concerning Fleetfoot's revelation, Ma'r S'one relapsed into his former sadness—the sighing and the shaking of the head recommenced.

"Yees," he began again after a little while. "I stopped at th' aarf-way 'saarf-ternoon."

"Ah, by-the-by, so you said," answered Michael encouragingly.

"'Arry Piggot carled me in, and there were a chaap there a-read'n' out the noos-paper. Oh, they be arful, they papers—arful."

"What was the matter this afternoon?" inquired Michael.

Ma'r S'one sighed heavily, and answered in a trembling voice—

"T'wur 'bout that poor blind cretur'."

"Who? The girl we saw on Tuesday?"

"Ay; they've give 'em six weeks ave it, Ma'rs Michael."

"Six weeks of it!" repeated Michael. "Have they now? Well, I suppose that old rascal deserves it. I suppose they both deserve it—don't you think so yourself, Mr. Ma'r S'one?"

Michael spoke quickly, and while his thoughts were far away from what he said. He had not paused to think whether old Bardsley and his grandchild deserved their

sentence, or whether it was an unjust one. His only feeling on hearing Ma'r S'one's news had been one of glad relief. For six weeks he need not be expecting any disclosures to Ambray concerning George. He had seen a two-days' old paper at the Team every day since their arrest, and had searched in it vainly for any news of the blind impostors.

Six weeks! Who could tell whether by the end of such time that might not be known at the High Mills which would render the worst Bardsley could have to say stingless and trivial?

Michael's walk homewards was a sad one. He seemed to have added Ma'r S'one's tender-hearted pity to his own, when thinking of that helpless and erring pair.

"Does *she* watch for George to deliver her?" he wondered. And all night that question made him fancy he saw her little blind face at her prison window, listening and watching in its twofold darkness.

CHAPTER IX.

MA'R S'ONE IN DISGRACE.

"Little shall I grace my cause
In speaking for myself."

SHAKSPEARE.

THE pair had walked on for nearly ten minutes in silence, and Michael had forgotten the question he had asked M'ar S'one, when he was startled by the old man saying,

"You never aarst me 'bout th'og, Ma'r's Michael."

"No ; but I've been wondering all the way what luck you've had, Mr. Ma'r S'one."

"Arful—arful," groaned Ma'r S'one.
"Arful luck !"

Michael uttered an exclamation of sympathy and condolence.

"But what did you get for him, then?" he asked.

Ma'r S'one looked up as one aghast, and answered in a choking voice—

"Just what missus said—two pound eighteen and fourpence—Ma'rs Michael."

"What? four and twopence a stone! Well done!" cried Michael.

"Ah," said Ma'r S'one with much difficulty and catching of breath, "but you shud a see th' old chaap as baught it, Ma'rs Michael, arl bent, an' gray and saarft in th'ead he wur, and grinny-at-nothing like, and aarf a score older'an me, Ma'rs Michael, he telled me esself."

Michael tried to comfort him by assuring him he had acted but as any one else would have done, but his words had no power to remove the old man's conviction that he deserved imprisonment far more than Polly Bardsley.

Michael parted from Ma'r S'one at Buckholt farmhouse.

He was carrying his purchase down the yard for him, and had nearly passed the front door before he noticed that Mrs. Moon was standing there.

No sooner did Ma'r S'one also become aware of this fact, than he made a nervous attempt to possess himself of what Michael was carrying for him.

Mrs. Moon, however, had already seen them, and Ma'r S'one was soon shaking at the sound of her voice, and looking helplessly at Michael.

"Well, Ma'r S'one," she called out, "I shud ha' thart you hadn't so much to do to fatigue you but what you could a ca'ied your own little harrants from Tidhurst without having a passel o' men to bring 'em home for you."

Michael had grown used to being so spoken of by this time, and gave her a civil "Good evening" as he put down Ma'r

S'one's little errands, which consisted of two new pitchforks and a heavy horse-collar.

"I tell you what, Ma'r S'one," cried Mrs. Moon, without deigning to notice Michael's respectful salutation, "when you're out for your own pleasure you go into what company you like—I'm not going to look after you at your age—not I; but when you're on business o' mine, you'll please to keep yourself to yourself: so let that be a understood thing, or you and me will farl out."

"Yes, missis," answered Ma'r S'one in a great tremble, and signing to Michael by imploring jerks of his elbow to go and leave him.

"And I shud like to know how much longer you *are* going to stand there," she continued almost in the same breath, "without a word o' 'pology for bein' so late, an' they caarves left without bite nor sup this nine hour. It's a deal o' use me keepin' a elderly man as wants constant

physicking and pampering—o' purpose to be responsible and stiddy, to feed the animals, and he behaving just for arl the world like a giddy lad. Do you hear me, Ma'r S'one, or do you intend to stand there sett'n' me at defiance arl night?"

The "physicking" to which Mrs. Moon alluded had been the administration by her of a black draught on one occasion, about a year ago, when Ma'r S'one, from the effects of over-work, had been unable to rise in the morning; the "pampering" had been the swallowing of a little gruel the next day, when he was too sick to take anything else.

The idea of setting any one at defiance was so terrible to Ma'r S'one, that he shook like an aspen as he protested, in a voice full of distress—

"I wur goin' to 'polergize 'bout bein' so laate, missis, but you was tellin' me 'bout th' caarves. I wur laate because I gits along so slow; and 'Arry carled me in

th' aarf-way just ter arst me how you was."

Ma'r S'one did tell small untruths sometimes, for "peace and quiet." And this was one, as Michael knew by the faint flush that came over his hard little cheek.

"But I 'polergize humbly, missis," he added. "And I——"

"When you've done these parltry s'cuses, Ma'r S'one," interrupted Mrs. Moon sharply, "I shall be glad if you'll please to recollect I'm waiting arl this time to hear about the business you was sent on."

Ma'r S'one, after much fumbling, drew the purse from his bosom, and with a guilty glance at Michael, gave its contents into Mrs. Moon's fat hand.

Her face expressed so much satisfaction that Ma'r S'one began to feel a little consoled for all his misgivings of conscience.

"Come, that's arl right," she said, putting the money into her pocket; but the next instant her eye and voice were as

sharp as before, when she looked at Ma'r S'one and observed—

“But you know this is just a proof o' what I'm arlways sayin', Ma'r S'one, as you *can* do much more 'an you chooses to do.”

Even Ma'r S'one's patient spirit was stung by the injustice of this remark.

“I does arl as lays i' my power, missis——”

“There, don't argue at mé, Ma'r S'one,” cried Mrs. Moon; “I wouldn't ha' that if you were as old as 'Thuseler. Come now, I shall be glad if you'll get th' yard cleared o' your friends. You know it's a thing as I never allow no one; a pack o' strangers on the premises arfter dark, speshly from London.”

Michael, who had had reasons of his own for waiting, came forward at this, and pretending not to have heard any of the doubtful allusions to himself, inquired if he could take any message to the High Mills for her.

As Mrs. Moon also feigned deafness, and turned her back upon him, Michael went up the yard with Ma'r S'one, who let him out at the gates with many expressions of humble gratitude for his company. He also apologized to him for having tried to hasten his departure.

"But you see I didn't want fur to aggrawate missis." He explained—"She's arful haard to-night, but it's best not to aggrawate, but to do arl we can fur peace and quiet."

And as Michael turned away he heard the old man murmuring to himself—

"'Cline our 'erts t' keep this la'!"

CHAPTER X.

MICHAEL UNDERTAKES A NEW BURDEN.

“The auld beggar man was bound for the mill,
With a hey lillelu and a how lo lan.”

PERCY RELIQUES.

As it was now known that George's pictures had not been accepted,—if they had been sent,—and as he still did not come or write, every day which passed seemed to increase the probability that ties stronger than those of home were holding him. For this reason Michael knew that Ambray and Nora regarded these sweet summer days only as lovely thieves stealing wealth from their treasure-house of hope.

Nora little dreamed who knew her best in those days of outward sweetness and

inward bitterness, — whose honest eyes watched her from afar when she walked in her aunt's garden, or stood trying to interest herself in seeing the hops tied to the sticks, — whose thoughts followed her at evening up to the old drawing-room, — whose ears listened to the music to which she turned the sorrows of her heart there in the twilight, when the cows were lowing to Ma'r S'one as he softly shut door after door in the yard, and tottered gratefully to his bed in the stable, a little and yet a little more weary each day than the last.

One evening when Ambray was alone in the mill, and Michael was returning from a journey with Fleetfoot, he suddenly saw passing by the smithy two figures, which he felt certain could belong to none but Bardsley and his granddaughter.

Long before he came into the village they had disappeared.

Michael stopped at the smithy, and

called the old smith out to look at one of Fleetfoot's shoes, which he had put on that morning. The smith saw nothing wrong with it, and disagreed with Michael as to the necessity of doing his work over again.

Michael, however, insisted in a voice and manner almost menacing, and turned away up the White Lane, leaving the waggon standing there, and the smithy loungers staring after him open-mouthed.

When Michael reached the top of the White Lane, and the mill-field lay level before him, he saw nothing of the two figures.

They must have gone into the mill.

Michael set off running, and burst in at the mill door, breathless and with a tiger-like fire in his great eyes.

First he saw Ambray, who stood with folded arms looking towards the door, as if he had heard his hurried steps and watched for him.

He turned to look in that direction

which Ambray fronted, and then he saw Bardsley standing with his hat in his hand, and Polly leaning at his side, looking giddy and scared with the noise of the mill.

They were considerably thinner, paler, and more ragged than when he had last seen them. In that hurried and excited glance it seemed to him that Bardsley's face showed less cunning and satire, more bitterness and desperation than formerly.

"You are in a hurry, Michael," said Ambray, with a look and tone of peculiar meaning, of which Michael could understand nothing, and at which he could only wonder vaguely.

He attempted no reply, but returned Ambray's look, quite incapable of hiding his great excitement from him.

"Here are some friends of yours, you see," Ambray said, still looking at him with the same searching expression.

"Friends of mine?" echoed Michael

with a laugh, scarcely knowing what he was saying.

Bardsley showed the same kind of interest in listening to and considering over Michael's voice as he had done on the occasion of his former visit to the mill. Now, as then, he seemed to feel he was mistaken in thinking he had heard it before.

Michael too watched as he had watched then for the effect his voice would have upon the blind man. And this time he thought, as he had thought before, it was not remembered by him.

Seeing this, he was but the more amazed at the thought of Ambray's evident suspicion of him in connection with Bardsley.

All possible conjectures passed through his mind startingly and rapidly. Was Bardsley cheating him? Had he recognized him from the first? Did he know the secret of George Ambray's absence,

and inquire after him only to mislead Michael as to the purpose of his visit ?

“ Well,” said Ambray, turning to Bardsley, “ and I am to understand, then, that until this man came in your way you were prosperous and comfortable ? ”

“ We was so, sir,” replied Bardsley ; “ the talk and enwy of neighbours. Our means was not large, certainly ; but neither was our wants, sir. I would have had you see this child in those days, sir.”

“ Let the girl sit down,” said Ambray, himself touching her shoulders, and guiding her to a low bin. “ She looks bad enough now,” he added.

“ So I am told, sir,” answered Bardsley ; “ the truth is, sir, her sperit is broke by these ewents as I have told you of. In them days of which I was troubling of you with some account of, it was often remarked to me what a pictur’ of ’ealth she were, and what a pictur’ it was to see her, gay as e’er sighted on éarth, sir,

a-sitting at the door platting away at her baskets and a-singin' to the bird over her 'ead—as they say ud look down out of its cage all in a heap and sulky at bein' out-done in its own pertickler line of hart, which I have observed, sir, is a thing tryin' to the feelings of most on us, and to many as is of a 'igher moral tone than birds. But I detain you too long, sir, over these recklections of 'appier days."

"Yes, yes, be quick," said Ambray ; "you were telling me, before the door opened just now, that some of your neighbours blamed *you* for all this."

"They did, sir," replied Bardsley ; "they blamed me for havin' allowed his wisits ; but I am a simple old man, sir, of a trustin' nature, and for seemin' honesty and straightforradness of character I never met one like him. I shud 'a trusted him to the last, sir. Ah ! you see, sir," sighed Bardsley, drawing his sleeve across his eyes, and speaking in a voice broken with sobs, "it's so easy to deceive the blind."

“The villain!” cried the simple old miller, trembling with rage, and turning his back on Michael.

“Yes, sir,” whined Bardsley, proud of this stroke of success, “it is so very easy to deceive the blind and ’elpless.”

“Easy to who, to what kind o’ man is it easy?” asked Ambray, looking at Michael with eyes full of angry scorn. “Tell me who this scoundrel is, and what I have to do with him, that you come to me with this tale—that’s all I want to know.”

Bardsley hesitated.

“I—I feel for you, sir,” he stammered; “it will be a shock to you, sir. You mustn’t be too hard on him, sir.”

“Who is he, I ask you, and what have I to do with him?” repeated Ambray with stern impatience.

Bardsley appeared to be seriously disturbed by the task before him. His face grew flushed, his eyeballs rolled, and his fingers worked nervously.

“Indeed, sir,” he said, “I feel for you—I do, sir, with all my heart—in making known, sir, that this young man is your—is no other, sir, than your——”

“What now?” cried Ambray, for Michael had seized the beggar by his coat-collar, and was holding him off and looking into his master’s face with a gaze that puzzled and amazed him.

“Your—your servant, he means,” cried Michael, in a voice so deep and thick Ambray scarcely recognized it.

There was one in the mill who did, however, for no sooner had Michael spoken, than Bardsley became too excited even to remember the indignity he had received.

“Ha!” he shouted, throwing his hands upon Michael’s shoulders. “*Now* I know the voice!”

“Then mind it,” muttered Michael close in his ear. “As you value the life I saved, a word more now and you shall repent it.”

He turned towards Ambray, with eyes that had never looked more true—more full of devotion and courage.

“You have found me out, master,” he said, scarcely above his breath. “Isn’t that enough? Have I any right to ask you to leave me alone to satisfy this man? If I have, I would.”

Ambray gave him a look in which there was almost as much disappointment as contempt, and went out, closing the door violently after him.

“What lies are these you have come here with?” demanded Michael.

Bardsley was shaking himself, pulling up his collar, and gradually recovering from the effects of Michael’s somewhat rough handling.

“You saved my life,” he answered, “otherwise I might offer objections to the term. You saved my life, which is a haction as ought to ha’ won you uni-

wersal gratitude and respect, consequently I will *not* offer objections to your havin' seen fit to come between me and George Ambray's father, as I've come from London on purpose to see. I will only ask you *why* you did it?"

When the old miller had gone out, Michael's overwrought excitement had left him suddenly, and the consequences of what he had done oppressed him like a nightmare.

After his first half-frantic question to Bardsley, he had turned dizzy and gone to lean against the steps.

Glancing at Bardsley as this question, with all its suspense and fear, forced itself upon him, he saw, what he had not before noticed, that the old man was very far from sober.

His granddaughter, a picture of weariness and stupor, had fallen asleep where Ambray had seated her.

Bardsley was standing, sulky and per-

plexed, evidently waiting with no slight misgiving some explanation of Michael's conduct.

"So here is a second time," said Michael suddenly, "that I've saved your precious life for you."

"Eh?" cried Bardsley, lifting up his face in much alarm.

"Well," answered Michael, "I can tell you it would have been about as much as your life was worth to have let that old man know that the rascal you had been telling him of was his son. I wouldn't answer for what might have happened if I hadn't been here to stop you."

"I've always heerd as this old miller is a just and a honourable man," asserted Bardsley, "as wouldn't see the blind and 'elpless imposed on."

"He's one who wouldn't condemn his only son on the evidence of those who he's seen making imposition a business," said Michael quietly.

“Do you mean he wouldn’t believe me?” cried Bardsley, clenching his fists. “If it’s proofs and witnesses you want, I could over-run your parish with ’em any day.”

“Then why do you come here without any—with nothing but your tongue to tell your tale with?”

“Because I was driv’ by misfortchins to come as I could. But trust me, young man, *I’ll* make this place ring with his name afore I’ve done with him. Friend as yer are of his, I tell you that.”

“How do you know I’m a friend of his?”

“Wasn’t you with him that night? Wasn’t your cry, ‘Hold, George! hold!’ my sentence o’ life, as I may say? Ha! I knowed your voice from the first, though I couldn’t, so to say, lay my finger on where I’d heard it before—not till you pitched me agin the wall just now, and calls to the miller, ‘Your servant!’ in just the voice as you said, ‘Hold, George! hold!’ Then I knowed yer.”

Michael had become very pale while Bardsley was speaking, and had more than once started as if passionately to silence him.

For a moment or two he remained without saying anything, his eyes fixed steadily on the beggar's face. After this he rose from leaning against the steps, and approaching Bardsley with folded arms, said—

“Now, what was it you were saying to my master before I came in?”

“It's a weakness o' mine,” answered Bardsley, “to like to know a person's right to ask such a question as that.”

“Haven't I a right to ask it as George Ambray's friend?”

“If you are George Ambray's friend, friend 'nough to give yer a right to ask such a question, you are friend 'nough for him to have told you all about my affair with him without my doin' it.”

“Then I should be all the better able to know if your account of it is true.”

“Then I shan’t repeat it,” cried Bardsley impatiently. “I didn’t come here to dispute—I ain’t got my case ready to dispute. I came here t’ appeal, not to dispute—though I’ll do as much as you like o’ that when I has things ready.”

“Now, Bardsley,” said Michael, laying his hand on his shoulder, “let me give you a bit of advice.”

“It’s a thing as don’t generally agree with my digestion,” replied the old man, trying sulkily to jerk the hand from his shoulder.

“But you’ll find that this will, and I give it to you, Bardsley, as well out of consideration for your affliction, and”—looking round at Polly—“hers, as for *him*. I mean George Ambray. You are right, I *am* his friend, and I would like to do the best I can for him now that he is—not here to receive you and defend himself. My advice is, say no more to Ambray. Tell me the whole truth, prove it to me, and I will do the best

that can be done as to making you amends, if amends are due to you. What good can Ambray do you? He has barely enough to live upon, any one here will tell you that. I have the means of giving you some help if I see that you ought to have it."

Bardsley considered for some time, rubbing his hand over his face.

"Look here," he said, with decision, "I shan't tell you to-night what I'll do, except as I'll promise you to do nothing one way or another till you come to me at the Bay, that's to say, if you'll come to-morrer some time before evenin'."

"Why not tell me now? you know my time is not my own," said Michael.

"Well, if you must know why," answered Bardsley, "I should prefer as my head was a little clearer than I find it at present, owing to having had to let Polly rest rather oftener than usual on our way up here."

"At least let me know what you told Ambray," said Michael; "it didn't take you very long to tell it to him."

Bardsley was obstinate. He could not trust his head to tell anything that was to be disputed, he informed Michael.

“Arst for me at the Barge Aground,” directed Bardsley, “and I will leave ’em acquainted with my whereabouts. Now, Polly—come, come, come, no grumbling, sleepy ’ead—it’s the cool i’ the evenin’, and all down’ill.”

Polly rose and clung to his arm, turning back her weary little face, and calling, “Jowler, Jowler;” then suddenly leaning against her grandfather and sighing.

“Ah, poor Jowler!” said Bardsley, turning to Michael as they crossed the threshold, “I went to pay him the last offices o’ respect this morning, meanin’ as I went to tap him with my stick for the last time—wishin’ it was by any means the first—as he lay in the pond where it seems he’s spent the term of our retirement. He never took to the water before, but on this occasion, poor brute! he was over-persuaded by the

parish, and a bag o' stones tied to his neck, under which circumstances Jowler made his last pounce out of the beadle's arms. Come, Polly, best foot foremost—the blind must lead the blind now!"

CHAPTER XI.

BANISHED.

“For, Sir, I will not take a penny of thee
For all my craft, nor aught for my travail ;
Thou hast sufficient paid by my vitaille.”

CHAUCER.

WHEN Michael went home from his work, he knew directly by Mrs. Ambray's face that the miller had not yet been there since leaving the mill.

It was strange that on this evening George's mother should be unusually kind to him, keeping herself so busy over his comforts, as he took his tea, as scarcely to allow herself to sit still five minutes at a time.

It was about half an hour later when Ambray returned.

Michael, when he came in, was sitting at the table, bending over a letter for home which he had been writing by snatches for the last week. He looked up in patient expectation of the storm that was to burst.

The gaunt old miller had a look of triumph in his face, as well as sadness and contempt—the triumph of a man vain of his judgment, who finds a favourite prophecy fulfilled.

Michael returned his look with great gentle eyes, full of resignation and courage.

Instead of closing the door after him, the miller stood holding it open.

“Come,” he said to Michael, pointing out, “march! I’ll have no scoundrels here. Take yourself off. If my son was here you would not wait to be told twice. Out with you, you hypocrite!”

Michael sat still, his hands locked on the table before him.

He was too much confused and stunned to be able even to guess as to what kind of

disgrace he had taken from George's name to his own. He felt as yet like one fallen from a height—too breathless, too much paralyzed to know his own injuries.

The word hypocrite stung him a little ; his shoulders heaved rebelliously. He drew a deep breath, and looked at Ambray with heavy and perplexed eyes.

Mrs. Ambray, alarmed on her husband's account by his expression, laid her hands upon Michael in weak command and strong entreaty.

“ You've never deceived *me*, Michael Swift,” declared the miller in triumphant severity. “ I've known you for a different man from what you seemed since the first time you darkened my mill-door. I've suspected something between you and this Bardsley, too, ever since I was told you sent him away without letting me know he had asked for me. Ah, you can't keep these sort of things in the dark *here*, you see ; this isn't London.”

As Michael drew another hard breath, Mrs. Ambray tremblingly gave his head a push, at the same time commanding that he should not be insolent to his master when he saw him in the heat of passion.

“Who is in a passion?” asked a voice at the door; and all three turning to look, saw Nora Ambray standing there.

Mrs. Ambray hastened to meet her; Michael went and stood hesitatingly at the foot of the stairs that led from this room straight to his attic. The miller’s eyes followed him sternly, avoiding Nora’s, which were fixed on her uncle with gentle, smiling accusation, as knowing none other would dare to be in a passion under this roof.

Coughing and trembling, the miller threw himself into the wooden armchair by the fireplace.

In doing this his elbow knocked a little slate hanging near the mantelpiece, and made it swing and clatter against the wall.

Ambray turned and looked at it; then

resting his elbow on the chair back, leant his head on his hand and sighed bitterly.

It was on this slate that his debt to Michael had been recorded from the day of his arrival at the High Mills, in the first week of March.

He rose and supported himself by leaning against the table near where his niece stood.

“Nora,” he said, “I would do almost anything rather than ask you to intercede for me with your Aunt Moon again, but there’s no help for it. I must give this man his wages and be rid of him. I can’t and won’t, while there’s life in me, let such a rascal fall into George’s very footsteps here—taking his place in this house, at church along with us, and everywhere. No, I will not bear it.”

“Why do you stand there, Michael Swift,” demanded Mrs. Ambray sharply, “irritating your master by holding your tongue, when, I dare say, you could explain if you liked, and pacify him?”

“Not he!” cried the miller, turning upon Michael defiantly. “Explain! I don’t know any explanation a man can offer for cheating and misleading the blind, but that he is a worthless wretch that nothing better can be expected from.”

Michael at that moment knew none of the inward peace or confidence supposed by some people to be the portion of the falsely-accused. He was, on the contrary, finding himself every instant less and less able to endure with patience or resignation the consequences of his rash impulse. The anxiety with which he waited for the nature of the sin he had claimed as his being made known to him, was intensely painful. The shame which had already fallen on him was probably twice as hurtful as it would have been to one that deserved to be ashamed, and that was not so utterly unused to such a burden as was Michael, who had led the life of a child and a slave, and had been kept so sinless by his simplicity and his

fetters together, that even calumny had forborne touching him.

The most spitefully disposed in his own village would as soon have thought of slandering the babe of a week old, or the white-haired Methuselah of the place, as "honest Michael;" who, of course, being somewhat more sound and purely healthful of mind and heart than most men, was accounted a little "wanting." He was looked after by the village loungers with taps of the forehead and sympathetic winks, especially when he had just parted two furious dogs, or walked out on a Sunday with the plainest girl in Thames Dutton, rather than she should sit alone, and watch her pretty sisters parading their swains before her window.

So Michael's head hung down with as heavy a shame as the greatest sinner's could have done, before these three pairs of eyes all looking at him at once, and deciding with deep worldly wisdom that

because the cap did not fit him at all, and he carried it with so ill a grace, it must be his.

Suddenly he raised his head and looked at his master as he stood holding the little slate at Nora's elbow, and then turning, went heavily up the stairs.

They heard him tramping hastily about.

"He is putting up his things, John," observed Mrs. Ambray in alarmed but meek remonstrance.

"What do you say, Nora?" asked the miller, taking no notice of his wife. "You see he takes me at my word, as indeed he had better. Do you think Jane Moon will manage this for me? I believe I would rather cut my hand off than let it touch her money, but I can't keep a scoundrel in my house."

Nora, having received an admonitory twitch of the sleeve from Mrs. Ambray, understood she was not to appear too sanguine on the subject. She therefore

averted her eyes with an expression of profound consideration and dubiousness ; and when the silence became so long as to be embarrassing, looked up with an affectation of sudden hopefulness, inquiring briskly—

“ What’s to-day ? ”

“ Thursday,” answered the miller, looking at her anxiously ; and Nora echoed—

“ Thursday ? ” lifting her brows with a look that seemed to say that of all days in the week Thursday was the most unpropitious one that could have been for obtaining what they wanted.

A firm light step came down the stairs—unnaturally light and quick, the miller thought, for Michael’s ; his movements being generally a little ponderous and slow, steady and sure.

His cap hung behind Ambray. He stretched his arm out and got it. Mrs. Ambray silently drew her husband’s attention to this. The miller turned and scowled at him.

Michael returned his look with troubled, almost fierce, eyes. A panic was upon him; a wild desire to cast down the idol of this household; and he wished to escape while he yet had strength to control himself.

In turning to Michael, the miller had knocked the slate against him, and it had fallen to the brick floor.

Michael looked down on it, then put his foot upon it twice, breaking it to pieces.

“Let my wages be forgotten, as my hard service has been,” he said, in a voice that made Nora turn and look at him in amazement—it was so full of bitter and despairing solemnity.

“They will not be forgotten. I know where your father lives,” answered Ambray. “I shall send your wages there. You deserve them, as you deserve this usage; which you, no doubt, think hard, though *I* should treat my own son worse if he had acted as you have done.”

At this Michael, having his hand upon

the latch, turned, his eyes wild with the passion of some desperate reply; and he must have then spoken words which would have cost him a lifelong and bitter regret, had it not been for one of the most faint but subtle of influences.

The door of George's room opened out of the room they were now in. It was open at the moment that Michael lifted the latch of the other door, and as he turned round in his passion a slight breeze blew from it, bearing the scent of the flowers with which Mrs. Ambray, after country fashion, daily filled the little fireplace; wondering each morning whether those she placed there might be destined to greet the eyes of him for whom, like disappointed revellers but just arrived in gay robes, and with sweet stores in bosom and sachet to make merry through the summer's day, they were taken in their first freshness of floss and odour, honey and dew, to deck this little temple of vain hope.

Roses were there now, whose breath seemed to proclaim them the rich heirs to all the sweetness of the flowers that had lived and died since the year's beginning ; but to Michael, as the breeze brought their odour, it seemed like a sigh of bruised and patient love and hope, reminding him how long the vain watch had been kept there, and might still be kept.

He could not bid the watchers watch no more, and tell them that the tardy feet for which they listened would never reach their threshold ; that the voice they longed for could never speak to prove to them how much sweeter is a dear sound heard afresh, than one remembered ever so tenderly.

These things Michael could not tell them for reasons he thought good ; but he remembered that by refraining from uttering the words that had risen to his lips ere the breeze from this still, sad room had touched them like an angel's finger, he

might at least save the watchers from much bitterness.

So his tongue was stayed even while his heart was hot within him, and he left his master's house without another word.

CHAPTER XII.

DEPARTURE.

“Thou shalt hear
Distant harvest carols clear,
Rustle of the reaped corn,
Sweet birds antheming the morn.”

KEATS.

MICHAEL had decided on walking to Bulver's Bay and spending the night there, that he might lose no time in the morning in seeking Bardsley, and learning the truth, or as much of it as possible, from him.

The sunlight was still lingering among the pine-stems when Michael passed the knoll, and his heavy heart knew a throb of pleasure as he looked at it and remembered that, in spite of all that had happened this day, Lamberhurst was still ignorant

of how easily the proud wrestler, the hero of this spot, had allowed the world to throw him.

The Long Ridge fields also received from Michael a more peaceful farewell look than they would have done had he yielded to his temptation to make known how grievously the bright runner, whose feet still seemed to him to press and spurn the summer grass, had swerved and slipped.

The evening was breezeless ; its lull was without rest, its shade without dew ; it still seemed day with all the sun's heat, but without its colour ; the blue of the sky was blanched and faint ; the sun burned down in pale, fierce fire, leaving no crimson pall to cover the slow hearse. All the mill-sails on the heights were still.

Michael stopped and looked back.

The white mill being the nearest to the edge of the hill, he could see it, and it only.

The sails had fallen to rest in a position that made them appear like a huge cross.

The instant Michael looked up and saw it, the feeling came over him that this mill and this valley were not to be departed from, and borne only in remembrance by him; that with these things, already so familiar, he was to have yet a nearer, deeper acquaintance. He was to see the green corn ripen, and to hear the birds exult in the richness of the fields and woods, as they had exulted in the joyful promise of spring.

Would it be *only* to suffer?

The great grey-white cross prophesied to him: or rather Michael hung his fears upon it and read them freshly from its face, until, as the heat came down between his eyes and it, he could fancy that it grew and spread, darkening half the valley.

He turned away with a deep certainty that one day he must return to suffer here perhaps the worst that he had ever feared since his great sorrow, which led him to this place, had befallen him.

A skylark darted from the corn close to him and rose, sending up into the heat-misted skies, and letting fall to the heat-blurred earth, a fountain of song, bright as morning, fresh as rain.

Michael, at this voice of gladness starting up out of the silence and languor, like a sudden sweet deed from a stagnant life, looked up and laughed, and muttered while his worn upturned eyes danced in light—

“Well said, little silver-pipe! and I believe you too.”

What was said, and what believed in, lay between Michael and the speck growing more and more minute against the blanched blue of the evening sky.

CHAPTER XIII.

BARDSLEY'S STORY.

“Listen, then, for I will unfold my story, and will no longer make use of riddles away from the purpose.”

EURIPIDES.

WHEN Michael, early in the morning, called at the Barge Aground, no one there knew where Bardsley was to be met with.

On making a second call, an hour later, he heard he had been in for his morning draught, and had left word for Michael to join him on the beach beyond the Fish Market.

Michael, going in that direction, soon saw him in the distance, sitting alone, contemplative, ragged, solitary.

Bardsley knew his step, and listened to

its approach, smiling with gratified vanity at the keenness of his ear.

As Michael looked at him, it struck him with some surprise, that, as he sat there, his grey beard and rags the playthings of the wind, he appeared less repulsively wicked than pitifully, almost pathetically, insignificant and helpless. Perhaps, Michael thought, it could hardly be otherwise than that any form of evil *should* shrink and appear to diminish and wither here, in these grand front ranks of nature merging into heaven, from which they seem curtained only by excess of light.

Or might it be, Michael wondered, that even the man whom he had thought as unlikely to change his sins as the leopard his spots, had not been able to sit here without receiving inwardly *some* cleansing touches from that spirit of strong, fresh purity that breathes here always, making the sands so fair, and revealing the thousand faint, sweet tints, and tender graining of the pebbles?

“ Well, sir,” said the blind beggar, as Michael stood still near where he was sitting, “ here I am, you see, monarch of all I survey ! ”

His face, as he uplifted and turned it slowly from side to side while speaking, was not without a certain sadness and grim satire.

Michael looked at him, and was constrained to address him in a manner different from what he intended.

“ Bardsley, you are an old man,” he said. “ You have a child that I suppose you care for—one child ? This miller, *he* had——”

He stopped suddenly. Bardsley noticed the stop, and the word at which it was made. He did not, however, choose to let Michael perceive he had done so ; but to prevent him from thinking this, altered and finished the sentence for him as if involuntarily.

“ Yes, the miller has one child—one son—a very fine young man he is, too. As

he's a friend of yours, may I ask where he might be at this present time?"

In his eagerness to come at some idea of how Michael received the question, the blind face was not sufficiently guarded, but showed Michael it was listening intently to the very change of his breathing; to the turn of his foot in the shingle.

Michael stepped back, looked at it hard, and grew pale.

"As I am George Ambray's friend," he said, commanding his voice as well as he could, "you may be sure I am not likely to have much patience to answer your questions about him. I may as well tell you at once that he will not meet you, or have anything to do with you in this affair, except through me. If you ask me why—I say, remember your last meeting."

"Well," said Bardsley, after some hesitation, "you was saying about the miller having this one child, like as I have Polly. What do you want to make of that? 'Do

unto others as I'd be done by ; ' is that all the tune of it ? "

" Whatever I was going to say, I say this now," answered Michael, " that the nearer I find you keep to the truth in telling me about this affair, the better it will be for you and your poor child. Come, Bardsley, try it for once in your life, try it for her sake."

" What *you'd* call truth would be nothing but repeating word for word what young Ambray's told you, I suppose ? "

" No," returned Michael, " I can make allowances for both of you. I can see both sides of the story."

" Which is never alike," observed Bardsley, " to any of us, sighted or blind."

He remained for a moment or two silently digging into the beach with his stick. Suddenly he lifted his face toward the other with so savage an expression on it, that Michael began to hope he might be growing truthful.

“What’s he up to now?” he demanded in a tone of suppressed hatred and suspicion, “and *you*, miller, what do *you* turn up for to put yourself between man and wife?”

Michael’s astonishment was so great, he could only just keep himself from repeating Bardsley’s last words aloud, and though he did refrain from doing this, some slight movement of his foot on the stones, or some still slighter change in the sound of his breathing, made Bardsley suspect his surprise.

“Hah!” he cried, plunging his stick deep into the shingle, and bending forward as he grasped it in both hands, while a dusky red kindled on his cheek—“you didn’t know that, miller? Has he denied it—the young villain? Has he denied, I say, as Polly is his wife?”

The passion with which the face was almost illumined, and with which the ragged form quivered, left no doubt on

Michael's mind as to the truth of this new revelation.

"Come," said Michael, in as calm a tone as he could command, "why *will* you forget, Bardsley, that it's a part of our bargain that I answer no questions till you have said your say, that I may judge fairly between you and — my friend — George Ambray?"

To assist in hiding or calming his sudden excitement, Bardsley took off his hat, turned it round, and put it on again, giving the brim a pull down on one side, to make it better able to withstand the attacks of the wind.

This gave him time, Michael saw, to hold a sort of fierce conference with himself as to the advisability of trusting to his companion, or of refusing to do so. A look of helplessness and desperation passed over the face, which seemed to show that he gave up the struggle, and decided to trust Michael, simply because he did not know what better or safer thing to do.

“No doubt, young man,” he said savagely, “you thought it a sight too good for us that your fine friend shud marry her—that he shud be so good as even to have the intention—such scum as us! *He* marry Polly? Of course the very *idea* oughter satisfied us, let alone the cirrymony. What right had we to expect more, or to make so bold as to think he’d keep her? What right had my gal to sicken and shrink to a shadder, or such as ud knowed her from her birth to cry out agin him? No right, of course—no more ’an you think I have now to come to his father when I’m starvin’ and she’s starvin’, and gets six weeks of it for bein’ obligated to beg.”

“Well,” said Michael, fearful of letting the old man perceive his breathless interest and surprise, “don’t waste your time in that way; tell me the simple facts—your side of the story, as you say: and depend upon it, I shall know if you try to deceive me in anything, and make it the worse for you.”

“First of all,” said Bardsley, “did he dare to breathe a word agin Polly as first he knowed her?”

“I answer nothing till you’ve told me all.”

“Well,” continued Bardsley, “at the time these artists first see Polly a-sellin’ flowers, and came a-clamourin’ to me for to let her be a model, I take my oath as the child had more friends in ’igh circles than I can reklect to count.

“There was all the ladies connected with the blind school she’d bin in as an enfant, and run away from; not as she didn’t feel herself a equil with any there, but quite the contrary through feelin’s of independence such as always kept her family from risin’ as it might otherwise have done.

“Well, these ladies, at the time I’m speakin’ of, had took fresh interest in her, and got her ever so much basket-work and straw platting to do. Others give her different things to do; she was as busy as a

bee, and had so many fine friends a-callin' on her and bringin' one another to see her, I was forced to give up outdoor business and stay at home a purpose to answer their questions, which Polly was not quick at, and didn't used to give satisfaction with.

“ Altogether I was not the only person as declared there hadn't bin so many visitors in our court not since Sally Cole, as you've no doubt seen represented in the travellin' waxworks, lay in a trance at number three for seven months, never wakin' but only once when some gentlemen from the Temperance Society was there, when she expressed a wish to sign the pledge, and fell asleep agen as they put the pen into her hand. But you've read of it in the penny papers, as rose to tuppence on the day she spoke.

“ Polly never rose the papers—*her* case was considered strikin'—as being a blind person as could work so hard and be so contented; but simple industry and con-

tentment can never, of course, be as takin' to the public as the case of a young woman in a trance, as only wakes once in seven months to observe she is goin' to 'eaven, and consequently wishes to sign the pledge."

Bardsley paused and rubbed his head with an old handkerchief he found somewhere in the recesses of his hat, blowing contemptuously with his lips, and in other ways expressing his impatience at the depravity of the public taste.

Michael in listening to him found it not at all easy to follow him in his many changes of mood. He would without any kind of warning pass from a bitterly truthful manner to one of grossly affected simplicity, which would in its turn glide almost imperceptibly into a tone of intense sarcasm and mockery.

"However," he went on, "since the young woman I have named retired into the country, havin'—as her mother gave out when a medical inquiry was talked of—a

soul above earthly fame,—*since* then, sir, there has certainly bin no case to come up to Polly's. And at this height of our prosperity appears this young man—this gentleman, as I took him for, with his fine airs and speeches. Me and Polly's had up every day for models. Takin' from models, I suppose you are aware, is the art they 'as to study of lookin' at one person while drarin' another out of their own heads. At least I was led so to judge by the talk of the young gentlemen, when the one as had been last drarin' us was out of the room, and when they always agreed as there was no likeness either in the case of myself or Polly.

“The modellin' took pretty well for some time, and when it began to fail in regard to myself, I must own to bein' to blame. I don't deny as I got tired of it. Sittin' so long in one position in the constant dread of bein' howled at as if the person takin' of you was in the last agonies if you move

a muscle, is apt to bring on crick in the neck, and nervous twitchin's all over. Then, too, the bein' called an old rascal, and charged with ruinin' a rising young genus, because self-respect has compelled one to sew up a few of one's rags, was more than I could stand in the cause of hart or haypence, so I give it up.

“Polly, unfortunately, did *not* give it up. She was a favourite in other ways than as a model, as she amused them with her chatter, and with singin' to 'em. They used to meet—shoals of 'em—at one another's lodgin's, a purpose to hear her sing. One day young Ambray takes me by storm, comin' down upon me with all manner o' names and abuse about Polly, about me lettin' her be where he had drared her hisself. He used to be took with those fits o' sanctification sometimes; and it's what I used to hate in him more than anything. So did his friends: I found that out. He'd come all over good at once, and turn a nuisance to everybody

till the fit was gone. Of course I was obliged to act by what he said, and forbid Polly goin' nigh any o' the set agin.

“Well, we was ruined by it. Polly's ladies crossed to the other side the way as they passed our court. You see the sort of meetin's there had bin at Ambray's and the others' lodgings had made the evenin' parties scarce of young gentlemen; consequently Polly was past being forgiven—her poor name was picked to pieces, and ne'er a bit o' straw or basket stuff could the child get to plat it together agin. I don't say as your friend didn't have a life of it. Bein' the only one of the young men as took the affair to heart, and tried to help us as well as he could, he was of course fixed on as the worst; which at that time I am bound to say he was not, except in respect of having first led her amongst 'em. I never see anything like it in my life. The parish rose agin' him. I couldn't but pity him myself at that time. They tried to find

out his father's address, that he might be wrote to ; but, bless you, my lord had kep' it so close, nobody even knew his father was a miller. He never let his own landlady see the address on his letters. They wanted to get money from him to send Polly to a school ; and here the poor fellow hadn't paid his rent for I don't know how long. *I* would ha' let him alone with all my heart, then I would.

“He tried for a week or two to tide over it, and went about as proud and bright as ever ; but one day he had to give in—they drove him to a fever. We heard from his landlady as he was very comfortable, two old maiden ladies, with parish interests, having took upon themselves to take their knittin' every day and sit beside his bed, and talk to him the whole afternoon, in hopes to bring him to a better mind.

“Altogether, what with peculiar cooking—as cooking often *is* peculiar when rent is backward—and what with the over-ex-

citement of too much female society and an unusual rush of organs on the street, the poor young man was made so comfortable that it was said he wasn't likely ever to leave his bed again in this life.

“Having but just heard this, judge o' my astonishment when one mornin' my door opens and I hear a quick, unsteady step come in, and somethink breathing short and fast, then feel the table shake, and hear Polly cry out, and then hear a voice saying to her, ‘My child, we are not likely to make each other happy, God knows; but that these fools may see how good I think you, I will give you as honest a name as ever was, and put an end to their blabbing and make your life as peaceful as I can.’

“I had just presence of mind enough to go up and tell Traps, a friend o' mine in the bird line, who came down and spoke up to Mr. George, not only givin' the consent of the family, meanin' me, as was

too much took by surprise to give it myself, but likewise made hisself a comfort to the young man in telling him how everythink was to be managed for the weddin' to take place as it might be the day after to-morrow. Traps was rather pressin' in his offers to go home with him, and never leave him till the day, and he would have done so but that, as he told me, young Ambray give him such a look as he certainly *could* not, and *did* not like.

“No sooner was he out of the house than Traps says to me, ‘I hope all may turn out well, Bardsley,’ which caused a quarrel, bein’ that sort of obserwation which, when things *are* to all appearances turnin’ out uncommon well, is lowerin’ to the sperits. It was repeated by Traps more than once through that day and the next.

“Young Ambray came in for a few minutes on that next day to arrange the time we were to meet, and other matters. Traps again was pressin’ in his offers to

attend him home, and again remarked upon his look as not likin' it.

“As it happened, when the weddin' was over, and the crowds—Polly's own friends—cleared off, after he'd took her away in a cab, Traps was proved wrong, for every soul considered the ewent to have passed over grand. My congratulations was a'most too much for me. They was kep' up all night by friends dropping in, till, in course o' natur, the small consideration my son-in-law had left me as some small sort o' compensation for Polly, was swallered to a farden. They do say in our court to this day, as that 'ere little hentertainment was a credit to me. I must own, as regardin' my own feelin's, it was a good deal sp'ilt by the behaviour of Traps, as cast a gloom over us by remarkin' over and over again as the beginnin' of a thing was not to be considered as the end.

“Well, young man, I dessay as you know the rest as well as I do. Two months

goes by. Polly tumbles into my arms one day as I'm a feelin' round the corner. Traps helps me to carry her in in stericks, which when over, she tells us they are both starvin'—ill-treated by the people where they'd lodged, out Windsor way, and she'd left him to come back to daddy.

“Traps made it his foremost business to go and find him out; but whether Polly, for reasons of her own, gave wrong directions, or whether he'd took hisself off between the time Polly left and Traps got there, p'raps you know better than me. Certain gone he was.

“Traps came back in a peculiar state o' mind. Now, he's a young person o' peculiar temperment, is Traps. One might say as his thoughts had took lesson by the silly birds he caught, and got in a habit o' flying high out o' sight, and keepin' shy. As to guess what's in his mind, you might as well set yourself to calkilate how many drops of rain a cloud holds, and where each one's goin' to fall.

“ Well, after telling me how George Ambray warnt to be found or hered on where he'd bin—and he told it quite in a haperiently calm manner—Traps said no more till Polly had gone to bed and we two was alone. Then he remarked, as he set touching up two little birds as the drippin's from the ceilin' had washed the colours off— ‘ Bardsley,’ says he, ‘ it's a good thing to have a object in life.’

“ I thought he meant as he found his hart a comfort to him in agitations like the present, and risponded as I dessayed it were. ‘ Bardsley,’ says he, ‘ I've had three objects in my life.’ ‘ Have you, now?’ says I. ‘ Yes,’ says he. ‘ My first was to get her myself.’ ‘ To get who, Traps?’ says I. ‘ Night'ngale,’ says he. By which I knowed he meant Polly, that bein' his complimenterary term for her on account of her singin'. I was took aback, never more so. ‘ My next object,’ says Traps, ‘ when I seed the first was imposserble, was to see her married

tiptop. My present object,' says he, 'is to *hunt him out.*' He didn't speak loud now, but said it in a way as he sometimes said when I've been with him at his bird-ketchin' of a Sunday mornin', a little out o' town, he's said to a chaffinch, 'I'll have you, my dandy.' And not one o' that bird's feathers would I ha' betted for that bird's escape. I said, 'Traps,' I said, 'I believe you.' 'Ask me,' says he, 'where I begin the hunt, and I'll say,' says he, 'the theaters; for he can no more keep from them,' says he, 'than birds from a bush o' 'ips and 'aws.' Sometimes I went with him. But there," cried Bardsley, turning upon Michael suddenly and savagely, "you know the rest as well as I do."

"And you never," asked Michael, "met him again till——"

"Till you saved my life from him—no, I didn't."

Michael walked slowly to and fro between Bardsley and the sea for a minute or two,

then stopped before him. He was thinking why should he not let Bardsley tell the story to George's father after all. Was there anything unforgivable in it to him? Could the miller hear it without much pity and full forgiveness? Then Michael remembered the question would immediately arise, why had *he* taken upon himself to shelter George? He stood imagining the look, the surprise, the questioning, the suspicion of Ambray, on learning for the first time that Michael Swift, the servant who had come to him as an utter stranger, had known his son. He anticipated all the questions that would be on the miller's lips—why had he concealed from them that he had known him; and then,—*where had he seen George last?*

That thought would have decided Michael, even if it had not been followed by the recollection that the story of the last night on which Bardsley had seen George would necessarily be told by him to the

millar so far as Bardsley knew it, and that then the rest would be demanded of himself—how breathlessly he could well imagine.

So Michael told himself that while he still guarded that secret which was between him and the dead, this burden he had taken upon himself yesterday must be borne.

The question now was, how should he satisfy Bardsley sufficiently to keep him from again applying to the miller, or endeavouring to discover George?

“Well, Bardsley, you have kept as near the truth as could be expected of *you*,” he said, “and I promise you as much shall be done for you as can be, if you leave it to me, and trouble George Ambray’s father no more.”

“I shall see young Ambray himself somehow,” declared Bardsley. “He’s a-comin’ into money, and he shall be made to pay for this, first thing.”

“You will do nothing of the kind,” answered Michael. “You will not see

him or get anything from him but what you get through me. You can tell by my having let my master think it was me you meant had ruined you, as you called it, how determined I am in this."

Michael then sat down near him, and again explained to him the uselessness of appealing to Ambray, who had at present no means whatever of helping him. He hinted that George, being obliged, for reasons he could not go into now, to keep out of the way for the present, had empowered Michael to act for him in all his affairs as he thought best.

"And if," said Michael, "you pledge your word to come here no more, and to try and lead your granddaughter into a better way of life till—till more can be done for her, I will take the responsibility, on George Ambray's account, of giving you the means of doing so."

"Hark!" said Bardsley, raising his finger. "Talk o' hangels—'ere she comes."

CHAPTER XIV.

GEORGE'S WIFE.

“There is much for gratitude
In the shaping and upshot
Of my lot,
Though I seem of all things born
Most forlorn.”

PALMER.

MICHAEL looked both ways along the beach, but saw no one. Listening, however, he heard Polly's voice behind the cliff, and was not surprised that the artists should have been amused by her singing, which reminded him alternately of rough street vendors and the sweetest wild birds, London Saturday nights and dewy mornings in the country.

“She's a-singing,” explained Bardsley,

“so as I shall hear and holler out, to let her know where I am. She’s a sweet little pipe of her own, ain’t she? Hush! keep still, and let’s see if she don’t find me out without me moving.”

By this time Polly came in sight, with an empty basket on her head. She had ceased singing for a moment, but as she came along towards them she began again, putting her little brown hand to the side of her mouth, that the breeze might not blow her voice from the beach, and prevent its being heard by her grandfather, whom she was seeking. Michael was amused by her little song, as she gave the last line of each verse like a regular street cry :—

“ All up and down old London town,
In many a court and alley,
All day I cry, ‘ Come buy, O buy
My lilies of the walley !

“ ‘ Here’s wilets too, all wet with doo,
Fair ladies, for your tilets ;
All up the street they smell so sweet,
O who will buy my wilets ?

“ ‘ Here, take this lot for half a grot,
I’s e got so drenched and chilly,
And never solded, for all I’ve yelled,
A blessed daffadilly ;

“ ‘ I’ll ketch it so when home I go
With ne’er another fard’n ;
I’d rayther die than have to cry
Sweet flow’r-roots for yer gard’n ! ”

Polly, by the time her song was finished, had gone past them some yards ; and the expression of proud glee with which Bardsley waited in his certainty as to her soon perceiving him was dying from his face, when she stood still and half turned in troubled, tender bewilderment.

Bardsley heard her ; his smile expanded again, and he laid one finger on his lips, and held another up warningly to Michael.

The next instant Polly’s basket was sent flying, and she sprang towards the old man with a peal of laughter.

“ Ah—hah ! you old Turk ! You was goin’ to cheat me, was you ? ” she cried, coming down on the beach beside him

with a by no means graceful flop. "Here's a pretty hunt I've had for yer. And who's this you're a talkin' to?"

"This is a friend o' Mr. George Ambray's, Polly," answered Bardsley, seriously.

Polly became suddenly decorous, and drooping her face against her grandfather, and fingering his buttons as in old days, inquired in a low shy voice—

"It ain't Mr. Brown, daddy, is it, as drared me, standin' on a cheer on one toe, with the tambourine?"

"No, Polly, it ain't," replied her grandfather.

"Is it the gentleman as I was an angel with wings on for?" asked Polly dubiously.

"No, nor him neither, Polly."

"Is it him," asked Polly, "as took me with the doves on my shoulder? Oh, how they scratched!"

"No; guess again," said Bardsley, laughing. Michael had also laughed a little, at which Polly flushed and sprang lightly up,

and, standing before him in a charming attitude of recognition, said, shaking her head, and smiling and sighing at once, with the joy and pain of old memories—

“Ah! I remember now! You took me finding Moses, in Mrs. Green's back-parlour!”

“No, no,” laughed Michael gently, “still wrong, Polly, all wrong.”

Polly sat down by her grandfather, after which she said quietly—

“I know him, daddy; he was in the mill last night.”

“Right at last,” answered Bardsley.

Michael then talked over with him the several ways by which the old man proposed to employ himself and Polly under the advantages now offered. Michael urged another endeavour to get Polly taken back into the blind school, but at the mention of it she so drooped that he had not the heart to go on talking about what might after all prove unmanageable.

Bardsley dwelt with regret on the pity it was Polly's blindness prevented her from enjoying the advantages she might have had as the pupil of Traps's in the bird-painting—a prospect which he appeared unable to think of without emotion.

Nothing was settled when Michael left them, after making an appointment for the next day. He would gladly have got them off to London at once, and so avoid the danger of another meeting with Ambray, but this he could not do till he wrote to his father for money.

When he had walked some little distance along the beach in the direction of the town, Polly came running after him, begging saucily for a sixpence.

As Michael gave it to her he laid his hand on her shoulder, and looking at her eyes glittering at the coin, though they could not see it, said—

“You never saw George Ambray, Polly? You never had your sight when you knew him?”

Polly shook her head. Michael saw that a change had come over her when his name was mentioned. Her laughing lips became set, her eyelids fell like some dead things, and her eyeballs rolled under them in pain.

Michael was very sorry for what he had done; but as he *had* spoken and the change *had* come, it was a sad pleasure to him to talk of George again.

"Then you remember nothing about him but his voice, Polly?" he asked softly. "You do not know what he is like?"

Polly's shoulders rose under his hand; her set lips parted and let out a long shuddering breath, on which faintly and tenderly were borne the words—

"*I knowed what he was like.*"

"How, my poor girl, when you never saw him?"

The shoulder rose again, the long breath came again, murmuring softly and with faint triumph—

"But I ketched him all by ear."

"And you cared for him, Polly, so very, very much?"

At this question the tragic little face only grew paler, remaining motionless as marble.

"Are you very angry with him, Polly, then, for using you so ill?"

The pain all passed out of her face, which was raised to Michael with the smile of one who, having been reminded of many sorrows, is suddenly spoken to of a cherished blessing.

"He never used me ill," said Polly, with quiet, deep exultation. "That's only what *they* think. He know'd what was best."

"Tell me, Polly, did he send you away?"

"I runned home," answered Polly.

"Yes, but I want you to tell me—as his friend, you know, Polly, who knew him well—did you treat him so badly as to leave him when he was poor and ill, against his wish?"

Polly hung her head a moment or two, then suddenly caught Michael's arm with both hands, and stretched up till her mouth was near his bending ear.

"You won't never tell daddy—or Traps?"

"Never!"

"He never told me to go—but——"

Here Polly's voice failed, and Michael felt her agitated breathing on his ear.

"But," she went on, "he wished me gone. I got to know he was sick and tired of me and wished me gone, and so I runned away."

Michael would have asked more questions concerning his friend at this unhappy time, but he saw Bardsley's rags fluttering round the turn of the cliff.

Then he wished her good-bye gently, and left her.

Polly stood for some time in a sort of sorrowful trance, when she suddenly became aware of her sixpence. With a happy little cry, she tossed it up and caught it, and ran towards Bardsley.

"I say!" called Polly, "what'll yer have for dinner? I'm a-goin' to toss—heads, bacon; tails, herrin's."

"What is it you're a tossing with, Polly?" asked Bardsley, turning round greedily.

On Polly's putting the sixpence in his hand, he smiled.

"A couple o' penny loaves and one saveloy, Polly, must be the bill o' fare to-day," he said, putting it in his pocket; "for the other threepence I intend to use in purchasin' paper, envelope, and stamp. Ink we can borrer."

"Whatever for, daddy?" asked Polly, hungry and disappointed.

"To get our scholarly young friend at the Barge to write to Traps to-night for us, Polly," he answered, buttoning up his coat with unusual energy, "ewents havin' occurred as I require the light of Traps's calm judgment on."

CHAPTER XV.

AFTER THE STORM.

“ She loves with a love that cannot tire ;
And when, ah, woe ! she loves alone,
Through passionate duty love flames higher,
As grass grows taller round a stone.”

C. PATMORE.

It had been one of the mournfulest days to the old couple at the High Mills.

Nora had blamed Ambray for destroying, in his violence and folly, the arrangement to which she had had such difficulty in bringing Mrs. Moon to consent. When the miller asked her if she would have him keep such a character as Bardsley had described Michael's, and as Michael had accepted as his, Nora declared that the man should at least have had time

and opportunity allowed him to speak in his own defence—that his truthfulness was in his favour.

He would not, she reasoned, have accepted, as he had done, the charges made against him if they were really as heavy as Ambray thought them; and if he had not hoped to clear himself sufficiently for his master still to retain him. She spoke of the honest indignation she had seen in his face and manner from the moment she had come into the cottage, and altogether caused Ambray to regard his own conduct in so bad a light, that he, being one of those persons who no sooner see an unfavourable reflection of themselves than they are seized by a desire to smash the looking-glass, soon ordered her to go with very little more ceremony than he had shown Michael.

Mrs. Ambray, who had taken no part in the quarrel, but in alternately pulling Ambray's tall figure back into his chair,

from which he kept rising angrily, and in patting and stroking Nora's hands, was thankful when her niece had gone and she had but one temper to manage.

To soothe this one she tried a thousand arts, even descending to a little abuse of Michael, at which Ambray told her to hold her tongue, declaring that however bad the man might be, he had behaved well enough to her. Three or four hours she was on her feet attending to his comforts, his cough mixture, which he had made over again half-a-dozen times, his chest plaister, his rheumatic ankle and shoulder, and the innumerable requirements of a selfish man sick in heart and body, for all of which attention, when she at last sat down, aching in every limb, she was rewarded by seeing him drop his grey head in his hands, and hearing him moan into them—

“My God! what have I done to be left in the world like this?”

His wife, stung for his sake as well as

her own, looked upon him with inexpressible pity and tenderness.

“It’s hard for you that you should feel that, John,” she said; “God knows what I should do if *I* did.”

Ambray was not so intellectually swinish as to be quite ignorant of the worth of the pearls of affection that were cast so lavishly before him by the most leal old heart that ever beat, but in perceiving them and their value he was only troubled at times by a vague sense of waste, as one might be in using some precious material for a purpose for which the commonest would do as well. He needed in Esther but a nurse and servant—a supplier of common physical wants; his heart was closed obstinately to all affection, hope, or comfort from any source but one; and as from that nothing came, his spirit starved and soured, so that he, in his turn, had nothing to give. A beggar in vain himself, others must needs beg vainly of him. Thus he excused himself to himself

for his hardness, and when he saw his wife suffer at it, blamed the cause of his own suffering—George.

Since a morning in George's second summer when Ambray had watched him from the mill, using both his baby hands and setting his dimpled feet against a ridge to give him strength to tug a scarlet poppy from the corn, his affection for the child, and the ambition the act suggested—that he should reap a long life's harvest from his grandfather's land—had become a passion. At first this had met with but little hope to nourish it, but in time his brother's early death, and the prospect of George's marriage with Nora, had so strengthened it, that it overcame every other feeling; life itself was but a slave to it.

Thus when Ambray on the day following Michael's departure sat reflecting how this hope, this idol, had been injured by his soreness of temper, which had first

driven away the man whose presence had enabled them to subsist through this weary waiting, and next had hurt and offended George's betrothed herself, it was no wonder that his heart should be sick and full of despair.

His harsh treatment of Michael had been wrung from him by simple and bitter jealousy at God's having given one man such a son, while he who had staked his all upon his child—who had not retained or wished to retain one hope apart from him—was thus deserted, neglected, defied. Often he had felt inclined to lift his hand and strike Michael when he saw his dark eyes gleaming tenderly over one of old Swift's short, cold, ill-spelt letters.

For this reason the miller was but sulkily and dully pleased when at noon a fish-boy brought him a letter from Michael, asking forgiveness for his rough departure, and permission to return, and telling him

how he was arranging to assist those who had been injured, though not, Michael assured him, so greatly as Bardsley would have had him to believe.

Mrs. Ambray dared not remain in the room for fear her husband should see the relief and thankfulness in her face when, after having asked him what he should do about the letter, he had replied—

“Nothing—and if he comes—he comes.”

So when, after dark, the door opened, and Michael looked hesitatingly in, his great shoulders drawn up, his head bowed, his pardon-begging eyes dazed by the candle-light—a picture of profound and humble contrition—he was not forbidden to enter and seat himself in his old corner.

CHAPTER XVI.

MICHAEL'S GOLDEN MORNING.

“And thine the sunbeam given
To nature's morning hour,
Pure, warm, as when from heaven
It burst on Eden's bower.”

HALLECK.

THE next morning, when Mrs. Ambray saw the sails sweeping lazily round in a languid, sweet sea-breeze, and Michael, white from head to foot, standing on the little terrace, and looking across the Buckholt fields, she was obliged to hide behind the bee-hives, that she might have a thankful cry without being scolded for it.

Nora knew nothing of his return till she went to pay a visit to the mill, which she now supposed to be so utterly deserted.

When Michael saw her coming, he was standing inside the mill door, putting down an order he had just received, on the slate that hung against the wall.

It was yet early, scarcely seven o'clock, and the July morning, with the dew dried into it, was all glorious light and lustre.

Before he had seen Nora coming, Michael had paused unconsciously, with his hand against the slate to feast his eyes upon the rich summer and perfect day.

He was thinking as he looked, "How glorious everything would be—even now—if I had not offended her; if she smiled as she used to do when she saw me slaving for her people, happy and willing, and pitied me, as I know she did when I was dead beat at the evening—and railed at, instead of thanked. I've altered all that now by what I said. She thinks me a jealous, grasping, conceited ape for those words alone, besides all the rest of it."

And then, as deep regret and yearning brought the moisture to his wide out-gazing eyes, Nora came before them.

He had never seen her yet as she looked then in her sweet morning reverie.

Her simple cotton dress of green, faint as the first willow leaves that hang against the vivid March sky, gave fresh bloom to the colours in her face, and added snow to its whiteness.

Suffering seemed as yet only to have chiselled her features into more tender and exquisite lines, and to have given a star-like distance and mystery to the depths of light in her blue eyes.

Warm after her walk through the fierce sun, she had taken her hat off as she came towards the mill, and even the little dark penciling of hair on her forehead added to the indescribable tenderness there was in her whole look and mood as Michael's eyes lit on her.

To have his solitude, regret, and yearn-

ing so broken in upon was most startling to Michael.

His heart seemed to stand still, his strength to forsake him. He thought if his hand and arm had not been against the slate and wall he could hardly have stood.

Nora was also startled. She had imagined him a hundred miles away, and here she came upon him standing like a ghost, his wide eyes full of water, his cheeks and lips growing visibly paler.

“Michael!” she exclaimed involuntarily, “I did not know you had come back.”

Michael's heart was even yet not so broken by all his cares as to be able to resist the influence of such a morning and such a meeting. He was but startled for the moment, and when the first surprise had passed, a glow of perfect joy rushed over soul, and frame, and face.

He smiled upon Nora with delight and adoration undisguised.

“Yes,” he said joyously. “I have come back. Life here, even with disgrace and contempt, is better than elsewhere—even where one is thought ever so well of, and cared for ever so much.”

It was at that moment, for the first time, that Nora *knew* he loved her, and loved her greatly.

To see that love had grown up for her in his heart, and to know nothing of it till Michael’s smile showed it in its full summer strength, was a strange experience to her. She now told herself, all in a minute, that *this* accounted for all Michael’s strangeness of behaviour.

“And your poor wife, Michael,” she asked, “where have you left her?”

Michael laughed—a low gentle laugh, that seemed like the very expression of the absurd unreality which Nora felt hung about the idea of him as a married man.

She looked at him with puzzled, severe eyes.

"Does it all seem so easy to you to believe, then?" asked Michael, returning her look with one of steadfast love, and tender appeal. "Oh! you, about whom all the liars in the world could not make me believe an evil thing, do you so soon believe in so much bad of me?"

"That is it, Michael," cried Nora with the sudden frankness of a child. "I scarcely *can* believe it. But then—but then—you yourself owned it."

"I will own anything," answered Michael, "bear anything in patience—no matter what disgrace, I will bear it—if I only feel *you* cannot believe such things of me."

"I do not understand you," said Nora coldly; "if you convict yourself, what *are* we to think?"

"Do you think that *I* would believe an evil in you if your own lips confessed it?" asked Michael.

"Well, Michael," said Nora with more severity than she had spoken with yet, "I

see no use in saying anything more to you, except that you have an easy conscience to have been so cheerful so long here with such a secret on your mind."

"What! have I made you still more angry with me?" cried Michael, coming to the door as she turned to go away. "I cannot help my conscience, though it's true I know it isn't quite so timorous as such a rascal's should be. It *does* sometimes let me feel as free and jolly as the best fellow living. Sometimes—like as just now, on a fine morning, or when you speak to me—my very heart feels as innocent and happy as any bird that flies. A man who's cut out for a harmless, hard-working, open and happy sort o' life, can't be changed all at once, even by a great blow befalling him—at least I feel so."

As he ceased, Nora crossed the threshold without a word.

Michael followed her, and stopped her by a slight but eloquent, almost passionate, gesture of his hand.

"There is one thing," he said, speaking as she had never heard him speak before, with the full but finely modulated power of his strange voice, and without the hesitation she had always noticed in him. "Before you go, there is one thing I would ask of you. I don't wish to complain of my life. I never knew it had been so humdrum and drowsy till I came here—till I heard you read and talk, and learnt what it was to go through life with one's mind awake. But there it is, I have had nothing so worth remembering as that night I walked home with you. If I had anything I thought worth remembering before, then that night has taken the goodness out of it. I am likely to have a hard life, and a thankless life, and a long one—for I am very strong, and I am never likely to have another time come to me like that night. So I want to ask you to leave me that one dear—dear hour to remember, to think of

all my life, without it being spoilt by the thought of my having offended you by the words I spoke. Before you go—to speak to me no more, perhaps, for hours, days—God knows—perhaps not for weeks, or months, or years,—before you go, I do pray of you, humbly as you like, humbly as the greatest sinner on the earth (if that's what you must think me), I do beg of you to try and find it in your gentle heart to forgive me, and to tell me so.”

“That I certainly will, and do, Michael,” answered Nora, feeling that as she had made up her mind that Michael must be sent away as soon as ever he could be spared, it behoved her to be generous in this matter at least. “I do forgive you all that offended me that night, freely and fully.”

“What misery I have suffered through not asking before!” said Michael, in simple self-pity. “I might have known you were too good-hearted to refuse me. Ah, my

silver night! as I call it—how precious it will be now! And this”—he said, looking round with dazed but joyful eyes, “I think I will call this my golden morning. A visit from you! Where *is* my conscience? Why, I am as happy as a king, and proud as Lucifer!”

And with eyes closed in rapture, Michael erected himself, turned his dark face skywards, and laughed.

Nora went home, feeling very sure that he must be sent away as soon as times should be better, and a new man could be procured to fill his place.

CHAPTER XVII.

STORMY SUMMER.

“These are not natural events : they strengthen
From strange to stranger.”

SHAKSPEARE.

AMBRAY did not speak to Michael for several days. Life evidently was not to go on at the High Mills even as smoothly as it had done in the earlier part of the summer.

Michael's father wrote one day to tell him his money was all gone; and on another to tell him that an old blind man had been worrying them with mysterious demands in Michael's name. At this critical time Michael dared not cease sending the small sum Bardsley had received from him since his and Polly's return to London. To ob-

tain this money now he was obliged to beg Ambray to allow him to work some hours daily for Mrs. Moon, explaining to him his necessity for doing so.

Ambray did not refuse his consent, but was rather glad to have this thing to taunt Michael with, so that his life—what with overwork, unkindness constant and galling, and the weight of three other persons' troubles—was no easy burden to him.

He generally bore these taunts about Polly in silence and gentleness, but once or twice he had been unable to keep himself from turning upon Ambray with an indignant and passionate burst of laughter, which, though abruptly and sternly stopped, none the less had filled the old man with subdued fury.

Dissension seemed to ripen in the valley with the corn that summer. Ma'r S'one brought rumours of wars from the farm, where it seemed Mrs. Moon was encouraging an unwelcome wooer of Nora's, to her

niece's distress and Ambray's rage. There seemed no fear so strong in him as that of Nora breaking her engagement with George. If he heard of any of her friends from the Bay going to see her, he would never rest until he had learnt all he could about them ; and Nora seldom had a letter but he would hear of it, and demand of her the writer's name, and sometimes the contents of the letter also.

Michael knew that Nora tried hard to keep patience and peace in her heart through all this, but he often saw her leave the miller's cottage with flushed cheeks and weary eyes, and walk home with a slow and springless step.

Michael had not made her angry again, and his manner to her was so humble and timid, she could but be touched by it. He now had become a fixture in Nora's thoughts, for filling George's place so long seemed to make him as one of themselves.

Whenever Nora was reminded of

Michael's supposed marriage, and desertion of his wife, she was always freshly shocked, because it seemed impossible to her to believe in it. However her aunt convinced her, for a time, of its truth, Michael's face and whole manner of life seemed to always bring her back to an instinctive faith in his simplicity and goodness of heart.

Sometimes she dreamt of George and Michael together, merely because they *were* both in her thoughts. Then that made her half superstitious that their lives were to cross each other. From this sprang the thought—had they perhaps already met? She did not at all connect what George had said of his models with Michael's supposed wife and Bardsley, till one morning when she had George's letter open before her, while the miller was telling her again of the street scene at Bulver's Bay.

“*Both* blind!” she exclaimed, snatching up the letter and looking at it eagerly. “Why, uncle—it must be——”

“What now?” asked the miller.

The blood rushed to Nora’s face, then left it very white.

“It must be a mistake,” she murmured. “He never could treat two poor blind creatures in such a way. He seems so harmless.”

She said no more, and the miller, who was sitting facing the brilliant sun, had not seen her agitation.

The truth was, the thought had come with great throbs of fear—Was George, after all, the real culprit, and Michael screening him? At first she had been going to utter the thought aloud, but then had come the cautious pity that said to her heart—Should *you* be the first to betray him if others screen him?

She longed to charge Michael once more with having knowledge of George, and to draw from him the truth; but from the very moment the excitement of her suspicion was over, she felt the suspicion itself.

to be absurd, and that it ought to be forgotten like a morbid dream. Suppose these poor creatures and George's models *were* the same, she reasoned with herself, did that make it probable that Michael should ever have known George? She felt the idea to be more unlikely than any of the suppositions that sprang up in her heart, and were put aside every day and night. She felt, too, that were she ever so inclined to prove what the suspicion might be worth, it was almost impossible for her to do so. Supposing she told the miller, and made him get all from Michael, she might be betraying George to his father. As to waylaying Michael to speak to him privately, after what she knew of his feeling for her, that was against her very nature. She felt she could not do it.

Every day strengthened this feeling as she saw how much he suffered, and how he became more and more agitated in her presence.

Once having grown used to his humiliation in her knowledge of his hopeless love, he took no proud pains to hide it from her. In every humble glance he showed his whole soul in his face. Every child in the village might have known to whom flowed the worship of his honest heart.

Michael noticed that Nora began to catch some of the feverish, fresh expectancy that had possessed Ambray of late, and which seemed increasing upon him so that almost every sound made him start and tremble.

One night Michael heard him say to his wife in suppressed excitement,

“Esther, that boy’s coming—I feel it—I feel he might come in at any moment.”

The next day he told Nora the same thing, and her eyes filled as she looked at him solemnly and answered,

“How strange! I have felt so too.”

The only times of rest Michael knew in those days, so full of restlessness and fever,

were the evenings when he stole down the white village road, over which the shadows of the thatched cottages lay so softly and still, and leant upon the gate at Buckholt Farm. For it was at these times Nora's voice came out to complete the sweetness of the summer night, of the lake-like fields of heavy harvest dew, the star-jewelled mill-sails—still or moving—and the unseen sea, giving the valley breath with which to tell its odours.

Generally Michael would see Ma'r S'one listening close to the window, his hand behind his ear, his wondering little eyes fixed on his young mistress as she sang, with all her soul in her face—like a modern St. Cecilia trying to draw down the angel of peace.

Michael loved best to steal away before she rose, because sometimes her sigh, or look into the night, haunted him too long with its sweet patience and wonder, its foreboding or hope. Neither did he care

to hear the invariable and solemn exclamation of Ma'r S'one, as his smock disappeared round the house—

“The Lord furgive Ma'rs Garge!”

Mrs. Moon was always close to Nora's elbow, beating time with her substantial foot. She was a great lover of music, and thinking all the sweet richness of Nora's voice was derived from the school money she had paid for her, she had great satisfaction and pride in listening to her.

Sometimes Michael, as he leant on the gate outside, noticed that she was often, when in a fit of sleepy sentimentalism, unwise as to her choice of subjects in the songs she begged Nora to sing to her.

One night he had been listening late to the dear voice. The day had been one of intense heat, and even now the very stars seemed crowding forwards, and leaning thirstily towards the silver dew-lakes on the meadows.

Nora had just finished one of his favour-

ite songs, and he saw that she was rising, when her aunt laid her hand on her arm and said—

“*Do, Nara, sing ‘My ’ert’s Desire.’ It’s such a time since I heard it.*”

Then Michael heard her sing this song to an air so full of dreamy, gathering despair and hope, he could scarcely tell which it teemed of most :—

“The apples are gold in the orchard old,
And the purple grapes are sweet ;
The long yellow pear leaves its breath in the air
As, ripe, it falls at my feet.
High on the wall waves the snapdragon tall,
Marigolds faint in their fire,
Whilst early and late at the orchard gate
I watch for my heart’s desire.

“O’erhead, under feet, bloom alleys were sweet
As here I came in my tears,
To part from a face of comelier grace
Than fruit of a hundred years.
Now nectarines fall from the crumbling wall
In the sun’s red harvest fire,
Yet early and late at the orchard gate
I watch for my heart’s desire.”

Before the song was finished Michael was no longer on the spot where he had

heard it begun, nor was any form to be seen on the moonlit road. But in the ripe, waving corn there had come a sudden gap, which was about his length and breadth.

It was there that he lay trying to shut his ears to the refrain, as it came laden with soft passion through the odours of the garden—

“ Yet weeping I wait, and the year grows late,
O give me my heart's desire ! ”

When he rose up from the corn and went towards home, his heart cried out to him that what he was trying for was against nature, and he half resolved to give up his vain hope, and go back to the old life.

He sat through supper without tasting anything ; the farewell he was anticipating, as he looked from under his hand at the old faces, filled him with sorrow to the lips.

The old heads had never looked so venerably dear ; the old voices had never sounded so parental to his ears.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FIRST HARVESTERS.

“Forthwith this frame of mind was wrenched
With a woeful agony ;
Which forced me to begin my tale.”

COLERIDGE.

IN the morning, ast hey sat at breakfast, the first band of reapers went by the window.

Ambray started up, and, going to the door, looked after them with eyes half frenzied.

“My God !” he cried, “is that it ? Must I see *this* year’s sheaves over all my father’s land, without knowing if I shall ever see my boy again ? Oh, if he is not coming, let the harvest rot !”

He stretched his long arms out through the open door, and lifted up his face with a mingling of malediction and prayer fearful to see.

Michael rose, got past him, and went into the mill.

The whole morning he sat at one of the little windows without moving, watching the cottage-door and Ambray, who frequently came out of it, and walked a few yards in the sun, looking now with a quieter gloom at the reapers at their work. At last, suddenly, and quite before he was aware of his approach, Ambray felt Michael's hand touching his arm.

"Master," he said, breathing as if he had just run from some great distance, instead of Ambray's having seen him sitting quietly in the mill but a minute since, "may I speak to you?"

"Well," said the miller, "what now?"

"I wish to leave you," answered Michael. "I should be glad to go as soon as I can."

Ambray knew well enough that there were few men who would not have wished to go from such a master as he had been to Michael. But now he had grown so used to his servant's patience and humility as to consider this decision a piece of atrocious impudence.

"Go, then," he said in his first indignation—"with all my heart, and as soon as you like." And he added, mutteringly, something Michael did not hear about sending his wages by post.

Then, as Michael left him with the look of one who has found a miserable relief from a great torture, the miller called out after him—

"Don't tell my wife, or I shall have *her* at my ears, and I hate a scene. Take yourself off without a fuss—if you must go."

Then Ambray went into the mill. He stood for a few moments swelling with rage at Michael, but soon he was sitting on the bin, bowed down in utter misery and despair.

In less than ten minutes a shadow fell across the sunny doorway, and Ambray, glancing up, saw Michael with his bundle and his stick over his shoulder.

"I may say good-bye—to *you*—master?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

The only answer Ambray made was an impatient and proud gesture of his arm, signing him to go.

So Michael turned and went.

The next minute, when Ambray lifted his head, and saw through the open door the departing figure of his servant still in view, the sense of the goodness and faithfulness of what he was losing came upon him.

Before he was well aware of what he did, he was hobbling after Michael, at a greater rate than his old limbs had known for years.

Michael, hearing the steps, turned and found his master close to him.

The miller's breath was almost spent

by his run. He could not speak, but he took hold of Michael by the right shoulder and the right hand, and so held him till his breath came back.

“Michael,” he said at last, “stay with us, and you shall find things different. Stay with us—we are old and deserted. You have been better to us than any son. Stay and *be* a son. God knows when we shall ever see our own. Stay, Michael, and fill his place to us.”

Thus the cup for which Michael’s lips had thirsted was put to them, but instead of drinking, they turned from it sick and trembling.

The face that looked in Ambray’s appealing face seemed now the most aged of the two, so drawn up was it in lines of anguish.

“Master,” gasped Michael, “for this I have longed, for this I have toiled, and now—now I cannot take it. I dare not. Hear me,—I can keep it back no longer,—I must—I must speak.”

“Why, what is the matter with you?” asked Ambray with puzzled sternness, stepping back as he looked at him, and noticed that Michael was paler than he ever saw living man look, and that his eyes were at once more resolute, and more full of agony, than any eyes his own had yet encountered.

There was but one object concerning which Ambray could feel intense hope or fear—one source to which he could imagine such anguish as he saw here must belong.

“George!” he almost shouted, laying his hands on Michael’s shoulders, and looking upon him as if he would devour his news out of his soul before his lips could speak it. “Is it about George?”

“Let me come and tell you,” answered Michael. “Let me tell you in the mill.”

Half leaning on him, half supporting him to make him move faster, Ambray went with him into the mill.

They stood by the long deal shaft exactly as they stood there when Michael first

came, and where he had looked up and nodded as the miller said, "I have a son in London," and had felt that movement to be the greatest crime of which he had in all his life been guilty.

Ambray laid his hand upon the shaft now as he had done that day.

Michael also took hold of it to keep himself from falling.

As their eyes met again, Michael saw that Ambray had had time to reason with himself—to think that the news which looked so terrible in Michael's eyes need not necessarily be about his son.

Then, without an instant's pause, the words came with a dull monotony—like a bitter lesson learnt by heart and soul—

"I saved an old man's life from a young man who would have killed him—if I—had not used violence to the young man, who was strong—very strong. I used violence—I killed him—no one knows I did it—no one but you—his—his——"

Michael's voice failed him ; he saw that the miller drew himself back, erect and strong—that the hope which had risen in his eyes was determined to die hard.

Michael clung to the shaft like the last wretch left upon a wreck to the swaying mast, and cried—

“ Have mercy upon me, master ! ”

“ Unlucky wretch ! ” murmured Ambray, bewildered, “ what have *I* to do with mercy ? You have really done this thing you say you have ? You have killed a man ? *You !* ”

At this moment the bell attached to the mill-door rang ; a flood of light fell on their faces ; a girl had come for a small measure of barley.

Michael looked at her, and heard her demand, with a dull, vague wonder, a horror such as, if the dead could feel, they might know at seeing some one waiting a customary service from their hands.

He did not move except to take one hand from the shaft, and stand erect beside it.

Ambray with a strong step went and took a measure and filled it and poured the barley into the girl's apron, Michael staring at him with suspended breath, appalled by the sight of his calmness, which showed how little of his task was yet done.

He saw that hope, like some hurt, wild creature, was stung to fresh strength in him by the shock it had received, and was prepared to defend its fierce, faint life to the last.

When the girl had gone and Ambray had closed the door upon her, he turned to Michael with this look of assurance and defiance in his eyes, and Michael cried out in a voice scarcely louder than a breath, but audible and pain-burdened as the breath about to pass away for ever—

“You must understand me. I must make you understand me. This young man——”

His voice died, and they looked at each other in utter silence.

Nearly two minutes passed in this way before Michael again clung to the shaft as he had done before, and cried—

“Have mercy upon me—it was your son!”

Suddenly, before he well knew how Ambray had approached, or taken hold of him, Michael was half running with feet like lead—half being dragged along—past the field of fallen corn towards the cottage.

The next moment he was standing before Mrs. Ambray and Nora, and a voice such as he had never heard, but by which all fears of the past seemed uttered afresh, was shouting over him—

“What have you told me? Repeat it here—before this woman that bore him, and this girl—repeat it!”

END OF VOL. II.

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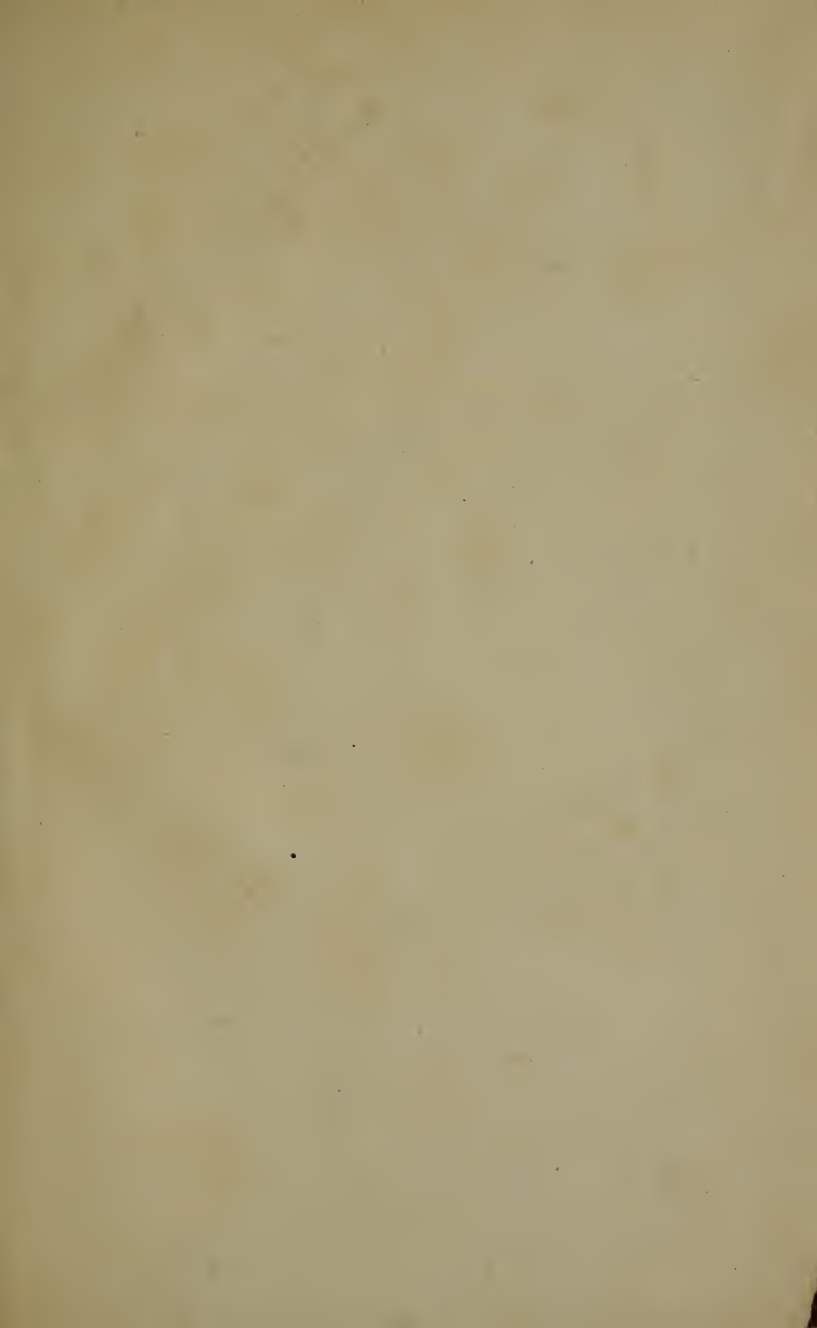
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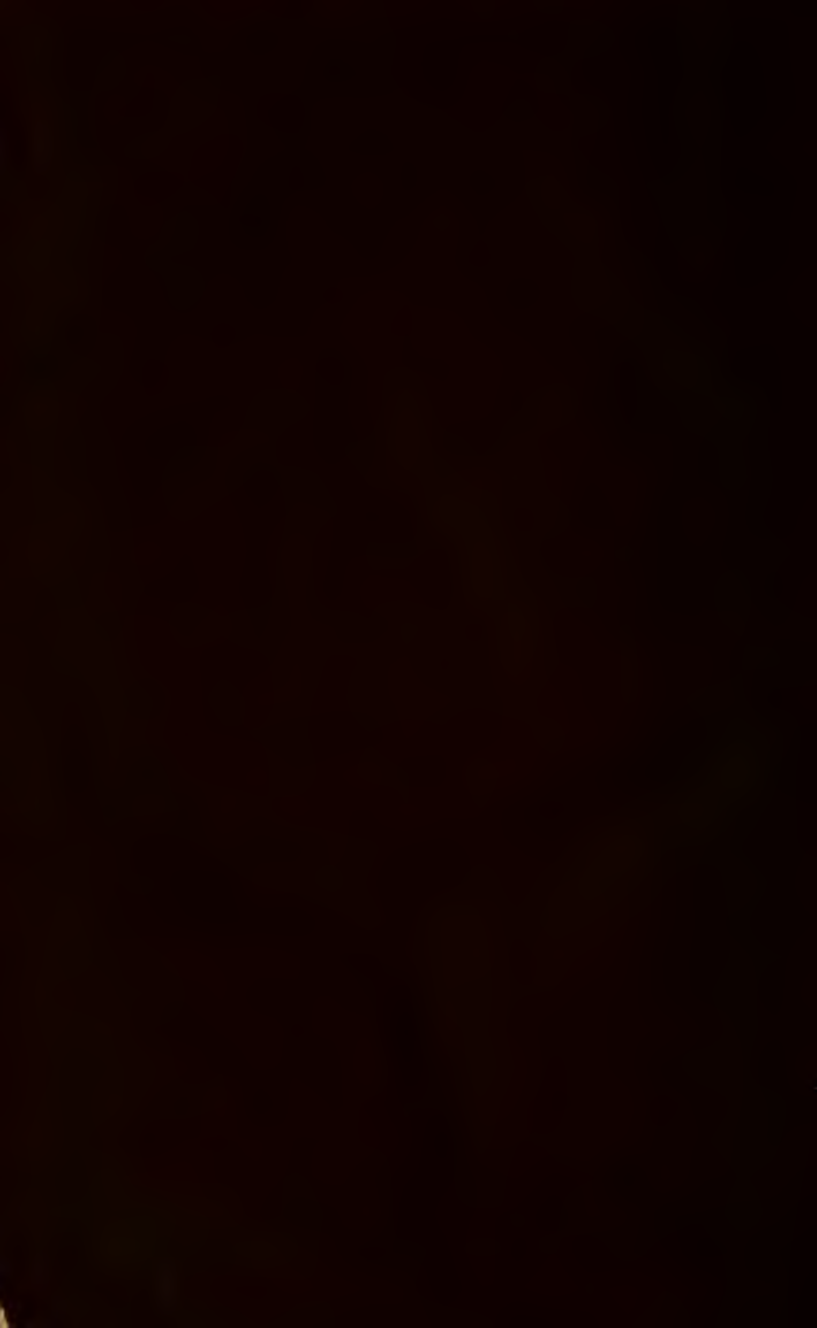
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